

Among Scrolls and Shadows

II

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Armenian Quarter

The light of early morning filtered through narrow stone windows, casting slender beams across the quiet upper room of Natan'el's modest house in the Armenian Quarter. A draft of cold air slipped through the shutters, stirring the edges of Caterina's linen shawl as she shifted beneath a rough wool blanket. She lay still for a moment, her breath soft and steady, as if listening to the murmurs of a city already awake with prayer and distant footsteps. Beside her, Dominic was already sitting upright on the edge of the straw mattress, the coarse fabric of his robes bunched around his waist, his bare feet resting on the cool stone floor.

There was a scent of woodsmoke and something warm rising from below—a slow, nutty aroma laced with steam and fire. Dominic glanced over his shoulder at Caterina. She met his gaze with a half-smile, her dark eyes still fogged with sleep, and nodded. They rose together, wordless, and stepped softly down the stone staircase that curved from the upper loft to the main room.

Natan'el greeted them with a grin and an old clay pot in hand. He stood beside a low hearth, stirring a thick porridge with a wooden spoon. The fire crackled in its narrow alcove, casting flickers of orange light onto the soot-darkened walls.

"I drew the water from the cistern before first light," Natan'el said, motioning for them to sit on the woven mats laid out around the hearth. "Fresh, cold. I brought some peanuts too—roasted them myself. Not much, but it will fill your stomach."

They ate gratefully, the warmth of the food spreading through their limbs. Outside, the sounds of merchants preparing their stalls began to echo faintly through the narrow alleys. The porridge, simple as it was, felt like communion—nourishing, grounding. Dominic savored each spoonful. He had eaten in silence for most of his life, in Vatican where silence was prayer. Here, the silence was different, shared and unforced.

After breakfast, they left the house, wrapped in cloaks against the morning chill, and stepped into the sunlit passages of the Armenian Quarter. The stone streets, polished smooth by generations of pilgrims, gleamed pale in the angled light. Vines crept along the high walls, and the smell of damp earth lingered from the night's dew. Armenian families passed by, some carrying baskets, others greeting Natan'el with nods or words in their own tongue. Bells did not ring here, but the rhythm of life was steady.

They walked in the direction of St. James' Cathedral, but Natan'el slowed near a smaller church set against the shadow of the greater one.

"This," he said, gesturing toward the adjacent structure, "is the Church of St. Toros. It holds the manuscript library—second only to Armenia herself. Some four thousand texts. You see those windows above? The light comes in just right for the scribes. There are older works too, if you have the eyes for them, Dominic."

Dominic paused to take in the rough, ancient stones, the thick wooden door reinforced with bronze studs, and the faint scent of dust and ink that seemed to linger around the entrance. Something stirred in him—hunger, not of the body but of the mind. He nodded but said nothing, saving his thoughts for later.

They continued to St. James' Cathedral. The courtyard opened before them like a quiet sanctuary, entered through a dog-legged passage from the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate Road. Stone crosses—khatchkars—decorated the walls, their forms weathered but still sharp in detail. Among them were early examples of the Jerusalem cross, their arms branching out like prayers etched in stone.

Lengths of wood and polished brass hung beside the entryway, swaying gently in the breeze. A monk emerged briefly and struck one with a wooden mallet. The hollow, rhythmic tones echoed through the courtyard—symandra, Natan'el explained, a tradition born of necessity after the ringing of bells had been forbidden centuries earlier.

Inside, the church was dim and overwhelming – high set windows, oil lamps, and countless candles casting uneven pools of gold. Massive chandeliers hung like constellations, their weight lost in the soaring vault of the dome. Gilded altars glimmered beneath layers of incense smoke. Lamps suspended from iron chains held ceramic eggs among them, painted and ancient. Every surface was adorned—wood carved in dense patterns, mother-of-pearl inlaid into pulpit panels, tiles in deep blues and greens. The marble floor was layered with thick carpets in red, green, and purple, muffling their footsteps as they stepped deeper into the nave.

Natan'el's voice was low, reverent.

“This is the cathedral of our Patriarchate,” he said to Dominic. “One of the most ornate in the Holy Land. Parts of it date to the year four hundred twenty. Our people were here before the Crusaders, before even the Church of Rome turned its eyes eastward. Armenia became Christian in the year three hundred one—the first to do so. Our monks came soon after and never left.”

He walked with them toward the sanctuary, where light fell in narrow shafts through ancient glass.

“The church is named for two martyrs,” he continued. “St. James the Great—apostle of the Christ—and St. James the Less, his kinsman and the first bishop of Jerusalem. James the Great was beheaded by Herod Agrippa, and the Less thrown from the Temple, then stoned and clubbed. We believe the head of James the Great lies here. The rest is in Spain, they say. And the body of James the Less sleeps in our crypt.”

Natan'el turned to Dominic with a faint glint in his eye.

“Some of us believe James the Great was a gnostic—too radical for the Temple and too dangerous for kings. That's why he was silenced.”

Dominic didn't answer right away. The air inside the cathedral was thick with centuries. He could feel it settling into his bones, as though memory lived not just in texts and artifacts, but in stone, in shadow, in silence.

They moved further into the nave, past painted saints and low-burning lamps.

"Our priests," Natan'el said, nodding toward one in the distance, "wear hoods shaped like our churches' domes. Walking churches. That is what we are meant to be."

Caterina, silent until now, looked up toward the vaulted ceiling.

"And what of the Crusaders?" she asked.

"They came too," Natan'el said, voice softer now. "Many were gnostics as well. They remembered James and came here to mourn him. This church survived their time—one of the few. It remembers those years."

A faint chant began in the distance, the first notes of morning liturgy rising through incense and stone. The three of them stood still, caught between time and eternity, as the city beyond the walls moved slowly into day.

The morning light outside the church had turned pale and honey-colored, slanting through the arched stone windows of St. James' Cathedral and casting long patterns across the marble floor. The incense had thinned, though it lingered like memory, curling into the corners where shadows clung. Dominic, Caterina, and Natan'el remained in the sacred hush of the cathedral, but now they moved with quiet purpose toward a shadowed alcove near the southern wall, where old candle soot marked the stones with centuries of devotion.

There, waiting beneath the carved gaze of a forgotten saint, stood a young woman, slight of frame, with a bundle of scrolls cradled in her arms. She was no older than twenty, her dark hair loosely tied beneath a scarf that did little to hide the ink stains smudged across her fingers. Her eyes flicked up at them—sharp, perceptive, and unmistakably cautious.

"This," Natan'el said in a voice just above a whisper, "is Helena bat Shimon. Daughter of the bookbinder near the silver gate. Outwardly obedient to every letter of her father's piety. Inwardly... a different story."

Helena bowed her head slightly, more a gesture of custom than submission. Dominic noted the way she gripped the scrolls—not like cargo, but like relics.

"She deciphers psalms the priests no longer read," Natan'el continued. "Keeps her own journals, scripture blurred with vision, dreams stitched into lines of the prophets. You'll like her, I think."

Helena offered a small smile, then reached into her satchel and withdrew a single, older scroll wrapped in oil-treated linen. Natan'el accepted it with care.

“The Testament of the Hollow Flame,” he said, glancing at the label scrawled in Armenian and another, fainter line in Syriac. “A fragment, but the imagery... strange fire, veiled knowledge, tongues not of angels but of stars. Helena has more, should you be interested, Dominic.”

“I am,” Dominic said, his voice quiet, but without hesitation. “And I’ll want to see her journals, if she allows.”

Helena met his gaze directly for a moment, then gave a small nod. “Perhaps. If you earn it.”

With that, the four of them stepped out of the cathedral into the daylight, passing beneath the khatchkars and the mute symandra, their footsteps echoing down the narrow paths of the Armenian Quarter. The streets were livelier now, bustling with traders and pilgrims, children weaving through clusters of travelers, voices rising in a polyphony of tongues. Natan’el led them eastward through a covered walkway and into a small market square shaded by fig trees and canvas awnings.

There, standing behind a stall adorned with bundles of dried herbs, vials of oil, and a scattering of papyrus folios, was a man of middle years with a hawk-like nose, ink-dark eyes, and a crimson scarf wrapped around his shoulders. He was in mid-conversation with a Greek-speaking woman, slipping seamlessly into Arabic as he passed her a parcel wrapped in goatskin.

“Yusuf al-Harrani,” Natan’el called softly.

The man looked up, a smile cracking his angular face. He stepped from behind the stall, wiping his hands on a linen cloth, and approached with outstretched arms.

“My friend,” Yusuf said warmly, clasping Natan’el’s shoulders. “And you’ve brought companions.”

Natan’el turned. “Dominic. Caterina. This is Yusuf al-Harrani—merchant of spices, incense, and... deeper things. Born in Harran, speaks Greek better than most Greeks, and his Syriac can raise the dead.”

Yusuf bowed slightly. “Welcome. You travel with Natan’el, so I trust you walk the crooked road.”

“We do,” Caterina answered. “And sometimes backwards.”

Yusuf laughed. “Then you’ll enjoy what I’ve brought today.”

He gestured to the stall and began opening a small cedar box. From within, he withdrew a collection of manuscripts—some bound, some loose. He laid them out like a magician displaying arcana.

“This,” he said, lifting one, “is a treatise from Damascus: *The Fragrant Tongue of the Earth*—an herbal guide with footnotes on dream-enhancing roots used by desert ascetics. This

one,” he continued, picking up a second volume wrapped in blue silk, “is called *The Salt That Listens*—a collection of dialogues with genies who dwell in ruined temples. Odd, fragmentary, but compelling.”

He unrolled a third scroll, written in jagged Latin script with Hebrew marginalia. “And here—*Liber Speculi Nocturni*—‘The Book of the Night Mirror.’ They say it was copied in Sicily, during the plague. The writer believed all mirrors contain trapped glimpses of Eden before the Fall.”

Dominic stepped forward, taking in the titles, the glyphs, the strangeness of it all.

“These are dangerous texts,” he said quietly.

“All true words are,” Yusuf replied, his voice low and even. “But they are needed. The gnosis has been scattered. I dream of gathering the fragments—Harran, Edessa, Córdoba, Alexandria, even here. We are few. But one day we may become one body again.”

Caterina ran her fingers along the silk of the genie text, her eyes thoughtful. “Are there more like you?”

“In every quarter,” Yusuf said. “But most stay hidden. It is better that way. Still...” He looked at Natan’el. “Sometimes paths cross.”

Natan’el nodded. “I thought it was time.”

Helena remained silent behind them, clutching her scrolls, listening to every word.

Yusuf looked at Dominic. “You were once of Rome?”

“I was,” Dominic said.

“Then you know how deep the chains are. But perhaps you also know where they are weakest.”

Dominic didn’t answer. Instead, he picked up the *Salt That Listens*, opening it gently to a page where the ink had bled slightly around a hand-drawn seal of smoke and flame.

“Let’s walk,” Yusuf said, already rolling up the books. “There’s a courtyard nearby where we won’t be overheard.”

And so they left the square together, a strange procession of four—scribe, monk, merchant, and nun—carrying secrets through the ancient veins of a city built on stones and silence.

The courtyard lay tucked behind a crumbling stone wall, half-forgotten between a weaver’s shop and the back of a closed bakery. A single fig tree spread its limbs above an old stone bench, its branches heavy with early autumn fruit. The shade offered them shelter from the rising midday heat, and the stillness felt almost too perfect—like a place suspended outside of time.

They sat in silence for a few moments, dust clinging to the hems of their garments, the scent of incense and crushed figs in the air. A wind passed overhead, rustling the branches just enough to make the shadows dance on the worn stone beneath their feet.

Yusuf glanced around once, then leaned forward, elbows on his knees. His voice dropped low, as if each word carried weight not meant for idle ears.

“Dominic. Caterina. What I am about to say rarely passes my lips. Not because I fear speaking it, but because truth has sharp edges—it cuts those not prepared to hear it.”

Dominic gave a small nod. “Say it.”

Yusuf looked him directly in the eyes. “There is a cult—hidden within the Christian Quarter. They call themselves *The Servants of the Black Flame*, though most know them only by whispers, if at all. Their leader is a figure no one has seen clearly. Some call him *The Black Emir*. Others say he is not one man but many—changing names, faces, clothing. But one thing is certain: wherever he walks, something ancient stirs.”

Caterina leaned forward slightly. “Occult? Or political?”

“Both,” Yusuf answered. “And neither. Their origins stretch far beyond the city walls, beyond Christendom. Back to Babylon, perhaps even Uruk. They whisper the old names—Baal-Hamon, Molech, Asherah turned into shadow. They never died. They merely learned to wear new robes. Roman, Jewish, Christian—it matters little. The Black Flame burns beneath them all.”

Dominic’s hands tensed in his lap. “I’ve seen them. Or what they leave behind. In the catacombs beneath the Vatican—there were signs. Blood-marked altars. Bones arranged in symbols older than scripture. I thought they were extinct. That I had outrun them.”

“You have outrun nothing,” Yusuf said grimly. “They are here, in Jerusalem. Embedded. Hiding within religious orders—Franciscan, Greek Orthodox. I suspect some among the Armenian clergy are not who they appear to be. They wear holy garments but serve a different flame.”

Helena, quiet until now, looked up from her scroll. “I found a passage once,” she said softly, “in a fragment mislabeled as a psalm. It spoke of ‘the three who watch the gate, bearing flame beneath the flesh.’ I thought it metaphor. Now...”

“They mark themselves,” Yusuf continued, turning to Dominic. “Three dots on the inside of the left arm. Hidden, like a servant’s birthmark. Most believe it is a secret. But you”—he narrowed his gaze—“you will know. You will feel it, Dominic. Those symbols don’t just live in ink—they radiate something... wrong. A hum below the surface.”

Dominic stared at the dust beneath his sandals. “So I’m not safe. Not even here.”

“No,” Yusuf said. “Especially not here. The city is a knot of overlapping secrets. Sect upon sect, each watching the other, each pretending to be blind. But everyone is listening. Everyone is gathering. Jerusalem is the eye of the storm.”

Caterina spoke next, her voice steady but low. “Are they tied to Rome still? To the Vatican?”

Yusuf gave a humorless chuckle. “The Black Flame dines with the Pope himself. They exist in the inner chambers. Their agents move between the sacred and the profane without notice. I would not be surprised if they whispered counsel into the ears of bishops who light the censer each morning.”

Dominic clenched his jaw. “That’s why I left. But the reach is longer than I imagined.”

“It is older,” Yusuf corrected. “Rome is merely the latest throne upon which they sit. This city—Jerusalem—is older still. And more tangled. There are places beneath the Temple Mount where no sunlight has touched for two thousand years. Places where the cries of burnt offerings still echo, not metaphorically, but literally. The stones remember. And so do the Flame’s servants.”

“Why haven’t they come for me yet?” Dominic asked.

“They are watching,” Yusuf said. “Testing your steps. You may have already spoken to one of them. You might again. They prefer slow poison over blades. Influence. Discredit. Isolation. Eventually, they will offer you something. Knowledge, perhaps. Or sanctuary. Whatever you lack. And then they will take everything.”

Helena pulled her shawl closer. “One of the deacons at the church... he reads alone at night. Locked doors. He doesn’t attend morning prayers.”

Yusuf raised an eyebrow. “Note him. But say nothing yet.”

Dominic exhaled slowly. The courtyard felt smaller now, more constricted. The city itself—walls, rooftops, alleyways—seemed to lean inward, listening.

“I came to Jerusalem for peace,” he muttered.

Natan’el, who had remained silent throughout, finally spoke. “No one comes here for peace, Dominic. Only for truth. And truth is always bloodstained.”

Another breeze stirred the fig leaves. The distant sound of a bell—no, a symandron—thudded from a far chapel.

Caterina rose, brushing dust from her robe. “Then we go forward. Eyes open. If they are watching, let them see.”

Yusuf smiled faintly. “Spoken like one who’s already seen the fire and stepped through it.”

Helena closed her scroll and tied it with a leather strip. “I’ll begin copying *The Hollow Flame* tonight. There’s a passage I want Dominic to read.”

Dominic nodded, but his thoughts were already far off—beyond the fig tree, beyond the courtyard, beyond even the safety of the ancient stones. Something old had followed him here, and now it walked beside him, cloaked in the language of the sacred.

The stone streets of the Armenian Quarter gradually gave way to the louder, more crowded veins of the Christian Quarter. The sunlight flickered through swaying fabrics hanging between buildings, and the shouts of merchants selling rosaries, incense, and polished stones echoed under vaulted passageways. Dominic walked silently, his eyes scanning the faces around them, the scent of olive oil and dust heavy in the air. The city seemed to close in tighter here—walls leaning, eyes watching.

Helena and Yusuf had departed earlier at a quiet intersection near the olive press, each slipping into the rhythms of their respective lives, leaving Dominic, Caterina, and Natan'el to continue alone.

They approached a thick crowd near the Souk el-Dabbagha, where the outer wall of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre rose in layers of time-worn stone. Tourists, monks, pilgrims, barefoot children, and armed Ottoman guards all passed in the same narrow artery, weaving around one another in a chaos that felt almost choreographed. The entrance—an arched doorway with one side permanently sealed—loomed ahead. The right door had been blocked since the 12th century, after the Muslim conquest, and Dominic paused to take it in.

“It looks like a fortress,” Caterina murmured.

“It is,” Natan'el said. “A fortress of stone and memory. A battlefield, not just of swords, but of prayers. Every inch here is disputed—every candle, every echo.”

They entered through the left-hand doorway and immediately turned hard right, ascending the tight, curving stairs that led up to Calvary. The air grew heavier with every step—hot, perfumed, ancient. The walls closed in with each curve, and the sounds of murmured Latin and Greek drifted upward like smoke.

“Early Christians revered this place,” Natan'el began as they climbed. “But the first to mark it was not a Christian emperor. It was Hadrian. He buried it—built a temple to Venus over it, as if to erase what had happened here.”

Dominic slowed his steps. “As if to crown the tomb with forgetfulness.”

Natan'el nodded. “But forgetfulness doesn't grow well in stone. In 326, Constantine tore down Hadrian's temple. His mother, Helena—sainted by some, reviled by others—ordered the hill carved away, the tomb exposed. They say she found the cross of Christ in a cistern nearby.”

“Found,” Caterina repeated, skeptical.

“Or claimed to. Either way, the story held,” Natan'el said.

They reached the top of the stairs, stepping into a space far more ornate than Dominic expected. Gold glittered from the walls, and silver lamps hung in heavy clusters from the ceiling. Directly ahead, behind a glass panel, a fissure split the exposed rock.

“Here,” Natan’el said, pointing. “Some say that crack came with the death of Christ. That the earth itself tore open.”

Dominic stepped forward. His eyes moved slowly over the chapels—Greek Orthodox on the left, Catholic on the right. The Catholic Chapel of the Nailing to the Cross stood beneath a ceiling where a faded mosaic of the Ascension still survived—a fragment of Crusader hands and dust. To the far right, a small window overlooked the Chapel of the Franks. Natan’el pointed again.

“The Tenth Station is there—Jesus stripped of his garments. The Eleventh is here, nailed to the cross. The Thirteenth, taken down. And beneath this silver disc...” he paused, “...they say the cross once stood. Reach through the hole, and you can still touch the stone of Calvary.”

Dominic remained silent, tracing the space with his eyes.

“Eastern and Western rites,” Caterina observed, motioning to the opposing chapels. “So close. And yet...”

Natan’el finished for her. “An abyss between them.”

They descended now, passing under arches and mosaics, entering the Rotunda. A hush fell over them. The vast dome soared above like a shell of heaven itself, and in its center stood the Edicule—the little house that held the Tomb.

“This is the Fourteenth Station,” Natan’el said quietly. “Where Christ lay buried. And, they say, where he rose.”

The marble slab within was hidden behind low doors, lit by the steady flicker of candles as tall as a man. The Rotunda itself still bore the weight of Constantine’s original foundation stones—ancient bones of the basilica, almost forgotten beneath the layers of conquest and reconstruction.

Dominic turned slowly, eyes following the curve of the massive columns.

“Who owns what?” he asked.

Natan’el gave a bitter smile. “Greeks call this the *Anastasis*—the place of resurrection. They hold the main space. The Armenians—my people—keep the Chapel of St. Helena below, though we call it for Gregory the Illuminator. The Latins have their corners too—the Franciscan Chapel of the Apparition, the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross, deep below.”

“And the rest?” asked Caterina.

“Copts. Syriacs. Ethiopians. They have narrow altars, stairs, niches... contested fragments. Every inch is claimed. Every candle lit is argued over. These communities guard their rights jealously—so much so, they have locked themselves in centuries of ritualized dispute. They fear any movement.

Dominic frowned. “This is the flaw,” he said quietly.

Natan’el’s voice grew harder. “It is not the rites themselves. It is the spirit behind them. This place... it breathes of conflict. Jealousy. Rivalry. Each priest guards his corner like a wolf at a bone. They chant of peace but burn with hatred. The Demiurge smiles on them.”

Caterina turned to him, sharply. “You mean that literally?”

“I do. Every time they kneel in pride, El Shaitan stirs. These mainstream rites—power structures, imperial thrones—they are not houses of God. They are cages. And here, in the Holy Sepulchre, you can feel the bars.”

Dominic looked toward the Edicule again. The flickering flames blurred his vision. The weight of centuries pressed down upon his chest like stone.

“I came to see where Christ was buried,” he said. “But I feel I’ve found where he was forgotten.”

Natan’el put a hand on his shoulder. “Then see with new eyes. He passed through death, but he left nothing here. What remains is the echo. This”—he gestured around—“is what men built in his absence. And the farther they built, the darker it grew.”

A Greek monk passed them, murmuring a prayer. A Franciscan nodded stiffly from the shadows of a side chapel. The air was thick with incense and unspoken tension.

Dominic turned to go. “Let’s leave. The dead here speak too loudly.”

And with that, they walked away from the tomb, out into the ever-churning light of Jerusalem, where holiness and heresy walked side by side, cloaked in the same sacred dust.

The sun hovered high now, casting short, harsh shadows across the stone-paved paths as Dominic, Natan’el, and Caterina walked eastward through the heart of Jerusalem. The air was dry and thick with the scent of heat-baked dust. Their steps slowed as they approached a vast open space where fractured stones and silent arches stood as remnants of something once immense and sacred.

Before them stretched the great platform—**the Temple Mount**, as it had long been called. Though now dominated by the Islamic shrines of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, it still bore the unmistakable outline of older foundations, blocks of ancient stone nearly swallowed by time. Here, the Jewish temples had once stood.

Natan’el stopped, his gaze fixed on the stones as if reading lines only he could see.

“This is where the world was once said to have begun,” he murmured. “The navel of creation. The hill called Moriah. But what was built here... and what was lost... that’s the story they do not tell fully in the churches or synagogues.”

Caterina looked across the vast plaza, her hand shielding her eyes. “So this is where the first temple stood?”

Natan’el nodded. “Yes. The Temple of Solomon. Built nearly a thousand years before Christ. It was glorious beyond imagination—cedars from Lebanon, gold hammered into every corner, and the Ark of the Covenant itself placed in the Holy of Holies. No idol, no form—just presence. Silence. Fire.”

Dominic stepped closer to the edge of the low stone wall, peering into the layers of cut stone beneath. “And it was destroyed.”

“By the Babylonians,” Natan’el said. “In the year 586 before the Nazarene’s birth. Nebuchadnezzar came with fury. The city fell. The temple burned. Its treasures taken, the priests killed or exiled. The Ark... gone. Lost. Some say hidden. Others, taken.”

Caterina looked down at the dust under her sandals. “And the Second Temple?”

Natan’el’s voice deepened. “When the exiles returned from Babylon, they built again—simpler, humbler. But it stood. Through the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, then Herod the Great expanded it into a marvel of the Roman world. The same temple the Christ walked within. The same one where He overturned the tables.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed. “But it was not spared either.”

“No,” Natan’el said. “In the year 70, after a brutal siege, the Romans under Titus destroyed it. They left no stone upon another, as He had foretold. Fire again. Blood again. Since then, the mount has remained templeless... unless you believe, as some do, that a different kind of temple was born in its place.”

He gestured broadly to the vastness of the plaza. “The Dome of the Rock was built in the late seventh century, when the Muslims took the city. Some say they built it to mark where Muhammad ascended to heaven. Others say it was also a statement—one faith replacing another. Below it, the rock where Abraham was said to have bound Isaac... or Ishmael, depending on who you ask.”

Caterina looked toward the gold dome gleaming in the sun. “And still the world burns over this place.”

“Yes,” Natan’el said quietly. “Because no one can let go of what they believe belongs to them. The First Temple, the Second, the Church, the Mosque... each poured its blood into this soil. And the stones, Dominic, they remember.”

Dominic reached out and touched one of the low-cut stones at the base of the ancient wall. It was smooth and cool, but solid as bone.

“This was once the holiest place on earth,” he said.

“And may yet be again,” Natan’el replied. “But not through altars or kings. Not through armies or priests. Not through flames or incense. The next temple must rise within—if it is to rise at all.”

There was a silence between them then. Only the wind moved, tugging at the edges of their robes.

Caterina broke it with a question. “Was the Ark ever found?”

“No,” Natan’el said. “Only rumors. Ethiopia, the Judean Desert, hidden tunnels beneath the Temple Mount. Some say it was never meant to be found—that the true covenant was broken long ago, and the Ark vanished with it. Others believe it was taken by those who knew its power would be twisted.”

Dominic’s eyes flicked briefly toward Caterina. “Or protected by those who understood its danger.”

They began walking again, circling the outer edge of the ruins.

“Here,” Natan’el said, pausing beside a half-buried foundation stone, “is where the priests once washed in basins of bronze, where lambs were slaughtered and incense was burned morning and night. And there—” he pointed to a broken stair descending to a gated vault “—are said to be remnants of Solomon’s stables, though few dare go down.”

He turned back to them, his expression unreadable. “This mount has seen prophets, armies, fire, sacrifice, and silence. It is not a holy place because men say it is. It is holy because it reveals who men truly are when they come to claim it.”

Dominic didn’t speak. He only stood there, listening to the wind over the stones, the cries of traders from afar, and the distant echo of prayers—Muslim, Jewish, Christian—all layered atop one another, all claiming descent from the same flame.

And for a moment, he felt the weight of every age upon his shoulders, and knew that Jerusalem was not a city at all, but a wound in time still bleeding quietly beneath the sun.

They walked beyond the Temple Mount, weaving through narrow alleys and stairways until the voices of the city faded behind them. Natan’el led them through an old stone archway half-swallowed by vines, into a quiet courtyard that seemed forgotten by time. A cracked olive tree stood in the center, casting a net of dappled shade onto the dusty ground. Here, birds sang, and nothing else stirred.

They sat beneath the olive tree, and for a moment, no one spoke. Dominic watched a spider mend its web in the crook of a stone column, while Caterina poured water from a skin into a small cup, handing it to Natan’el.

He took it, sipped slowly, then set it aside.

“There is something you must understand,” Natan’el said, eyes fixed on the earth. “Especially you, Dominic. If you are to walk deeper into the fires that burn beneath this city, you must see past the veils. Past names. Past scriptures.”

Dominic leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that the Jews, the ones who once built the temple... they are not who they believe themselves to be. Or rather, they are, but not in the way they think. They are not a separate people carved out of stone by God’s own hand. They are—like all of us—descendants of older tribes, older gods.”

Caterina’s brow furrowed. “You’re saying the Jews weren’t distinct from the Canaanites?”

“I am saying they **were** Canaanites,” Natan’el said firmly. “Or at least descended from the same tangled root. There were no sharp lines then. No pure tribes. The Israelites emerged out of the highland villages of ancient Canaan—part of the same blood and land. The cities of Canaan, like Megiddo, Hazor, Lachish... they were filled with kings, priests, and worshippers of Baal, El, Asherah. Long before Moses, long before Abraham, those gods ruled here.”

He reached down and picked up a small stone, rubbing it between his fingers.

“Baal, the storm god,” he continued. “Moloch, the devourer of children. El Elyon, the Most High. They had temples on high hills, ziggurats even, with bulls carved in gold and fire altars burning night and day. Sacrifices of animals, yes. But sometimes more. The Valley of Hinnom, just outside the city—that was one of the places. They called it *Gehenna*. Infants passed through the fire. The drums would beat so loud that the cries could not be heard.”

Dominic’s face darkened. “And this was common?”

“Widespread,” Natan’el said. “Carthage had the same rites. Tyre. Sidon. Even Jerusalem—before it was called such. The worship of Moloch and Baal was not rare or fringe. It was power. It was kingship. It was the way rulers held sway over fear and blood. Every city had its temple, its holy prostitutes, its fire pits. Baal had many faces—Hadad, Melqart, Resheph. Even the name *Israel—El*—points back to the same old god. The Jews did not invent monotheism out of nothing. They emerged from the chaos of collapsing Bronze Age kingdoms, carrying with them fragments of the past they would later condemn.”

Caterina looked thoughtful. “So why the separation? Why claim to be different?”

“To survive,” Natan’el said. “After Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the exiles—priests, scribes—redefined their story. They needed a clean beginning. A divine election. They took the fragments of their past and rewrote them. They cast the Canaanites as the wicked enemy, condemned their own gods as abominations, and declared themselves chosen.”

“But the blood was the same,” Dominic said.

“Yes,” Natan’el replied, “The blood remembers. Names change. But flesh remembers. The priests who cursed the groves of Asherah were born of women who once danced in them. The prophets who spoke against Baal were descended from those who served him. They buried the old gods under new names, but the fire never quite went out.”

He looked at the weathered stone of the courtyard wall.

“There were Baal temples at Dan, at Bethel, in Samaria. People have found altars, incense stands, bull idols, even Yahweh and Asherah carved together in early inscriptions. In Kuntillet Ajrud, they found pottery that read, ‘Yahweh and his Asherah.’ It was not always one god. That came later—out of crisis, not truth.”

Caterina sat back. “So what does that mean for faith? For everything that came after?”

“It means,” Natan’el said slowly, “that much of what men worship is a mask. And behind the mask... old shadows wait. Some merely forgotten. Others... still worshipped, in secret. The Black Flame, as we spoke of, they know this. They remember Moloch. They never stopped burning.”

Dominic was silent for a long while, watching the wind move through the leaves above.

“I was taught that God was one,” he said. “Eternal. Holy. But now it seems there are older fires under the altar.”

“There are,” Natan’el said. “And it’s not heresy to know that. It’s survival. If you do not know where your enemy comes from, you will never see him standing behind the veil.”

The courtyard fell quiet again.

The olive tree stood still. Only the dust moved.

The air beneath the olive tree had grown still, heavy as if holding breath. The afternoon sun dipped behind a passing cloud, softening the glare and giving the courtyard a muted calm. Natan’el leaned against the old stone wall, his fingers absently tracing the cracks in its surface. Dominic and Caterina sat across from him, silent, expectant.

“You asked before,” Natan’el said, his voice low, “how it is that holiness can dwell in a city soaked in blood, where even the so-called sacred turns to ruin. But the answer lies deeper than history, Dominic. It lies in the very design of the world.”

He let the silence stretch a little before continuing.

“This world was not made by a loving god. Not the one you were taught to worship in Rome. No... it was shaped by a tyrant, a blind, arrogant being who calls himself creator but is nothing more than a warden. The Gnostics called him the *Demiurge*. The builder of illusions. The architect of prisons.”

Dominic said nothing, but his jaw tensed slightly.

“Look at the body,” Natan’el continued. “It is made to suffer. We need water constantly, or we die. We must eat or weaken. If we don’t sleep, we lose our minds. Heat burns us. Cold freezes us. Our limbs decay, our bones ache, and from the moment we are born, we are dying. All by design. All engineered to bind the soul into a cage of hunger and fear.”

Caterina’s voice was quiet. “You mean suffering was intentional?”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “Every weakness of the flesh—intentional. Earthquakes that split the ground without warning. Sandstorms that blind and bury. Plagues that choke the lungs. Starvation in lands where the soil should feed many. This is not a flawed creation. It is a cruel one.”

Dominic looked up at him. “But what of nature? Of beauty? The stars, the sea, the warmth of love?”

“Reflections,” Natan’el said. “Traces of the Light that the Demiurge could not fully banish. Sparks of the higher realms buried in the soil. We see beauty because it reminds us of where we came from—what lies beyond. But the Demiurge twisted even that. He made religions to trap us. He split the tongues of men at Babel so we would no longer understand each other. He fractured truth into doctrines, sects, cults—all claiming to be the one path, each despising the others.”

Caterina murmured, “Divide and rule.”

“Exactly,” Natan’el replied. “Every war. Every holy book raised as a weapon. The Demiurge drinks the blood spilled on his altar of confusion.”

Dominic frowned. “And the demons?”

“They are his servants,” Natan’el said darkly. “His foot soldiers. They are not myths. They walk this earth, not in flesh, but in shadow. Feeding on pain, whispering into weak minds. They spread disease, incite hatred, latch onto despair like leeches.”

He looked around cautiously, then lowered his voice further.

“Names have been given to them by those who have glimpsed their presence. *Lucifuge Rofocale*, prince of contracts and blinding light. *Asmodeus*, who feeds on lust and madness. *Agares*, who spreads fear and weakness of will. *Beleth*, lord of war and frenzy. *Baal*, an ancient mask reborn as a general of corruption. *Buer*, master of sickness and false healing. These and others—all invisible to most eyes, but very real.”

Dominic shifted uncomfortably. “And no one sees them?”

“They operate in the space behind the visible,” Natan’el said. “Like shadows cast on a wall. Most dismiss them as nightmares or old superstitions. But they are there. In cities and deserts. In dreams and holy places. They wear the robes of priests. They ride with soldiers. They touch the minds of kings. But you, Dominic... one day, you will see them.”

Dominic stared at him. “How?”

“When your inner sight awakens,” Natan’el said. “When you stop looking outward for salvation. The Light does not live in temples. It is not in books or icons. It is not granted by rituals or sacraments. It waits within.”

“And how do I reach it?” Dominic asked, his voice almost a whisper.

Natan’el met his eyes. “By dying before you die. By shedding the illusion that you are this body, this fragile flesh. The Light cannot be touched by blade or fire. It is pure knowing. Pure being. Only by turning inward—through silence, suffering, and vision—can you pass through the walls the Demiurge has built.”

He paused.

“The ancient Gnostics said: *‘What is within you will save you. If you do not bring it forth, it will destroy you.’*”

Caterina looked at Dominic. “You’ve already begun. You left Rome. You left their lies. The rest is only descent—through pain, through shadow—until you reach the fire that frees.”

Dominic looked down at his hands. They trembled faintly.

“So I must suffer more to be free?”

“You must understand your suffering,” Natan’el said. “Then it becomes a door.”

The wind returned, stirring the olive branches overhead. The leaves whispered, as if the tree itself remembered these truths.

And in that still courtyard, Dominic felt the world grow wider—darker, yes, but also deeper. He sensed something vast just beyond the skin of what he could see. Not evil alone, but mystery. And somewhere within it, a narrow path gleaming in the dark.

They had remained under the olive tree longer than expected. The city’s rhythm passed them by—voices in distant streets, merchants shouting prices in mixed tongues, the faint call to prayer echoing from minarets. Time in Jerusalem was always split—between memory and the moment, between stone and silence. Natan’el sat with his arms folded, his gaze fixed on something far off beyond the walls.

“There’s another layer to this land,” he said finally, turning to Dominic and Caterina.

“You’ve seen the Jewish ruins, the Christian churches, the Islamic mosques—but beneath all of it, beneath even the Canaanite temples we spoke of, lies another web, spread by the empire that ruled this place longer than most care to remember. The Romans.”

Caterina shifted. “We saw their stones in the north. Roads, aqueducts.”

Natan’el nodded. “They left stone, yes. But they brought gods too. Many gods. And those gods still breathe in the cracks.”

Dominic frowned. “You mean in relics? In memory?”

“I mean in flesh,” Natan’el said. “Listen carefully. The Romans came here in 63 before the Nazarene was born—Pompey marched into Judea and seized Jerusalem. At first, they played the role of tolerators. They allowed the Jews to keep their temple. But wherever Roman garrisons went, their gods went with them. In Caesarea Maritima—the coastal port Herod built—you’ll find temples to Roma, to Augustus, to Jupiter. Even the emperor himself was worshipped. Incense was burned to his statue daily.”

He glanced at Dominic. “In Jerusalem, they were more cautious at first. No pagan temples in the early years—but the soldiers brought their standards, their eagles, their laurel-crowned images of Caesar. Those alone were enough to provoke riots. The people here would rather die than see a graven image in the holy city.”

Caterina tilted her head. “And after the temple fell?”

“Everything changed,” Natan’el said. “When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70, the Romans began reshaping the city to their liking. But it was after the second revolt—the Bar Kokhba rebellion in 132—that the worst desecration came. Hadrian razed the remnants and rebuilt the city as a Roman colony. He renamed it *Aelia Capitolina*. The Temple Mount—once the holiest place in Judaism—was paved over, and a temple to *Jupiter Capitolinus* placed directly above the ruins. That was no accident. It was a message.”

Dominic’s expression darkened. “A deliberate erasure.”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “But it didn’t stop there. On the site now called Golgotha, where the Nazarene was said to be crucified, they built a temple to Venus—Aphrodite. And the rites there... were no longer those of mourning or prayer. That place became a center of bodily lust, offering to Aphrodite of sorts. It was meant to desecrate, to overwrite. They filled the land with their idols.”

Caterina’s voice dropped. “Did it work?”

“On the surface,” Natan’el replied. “But not underneath. Beneath the new roads and Roman facades, the old cults festered. One in particular—Mithras. The god of the soldiers. The slayer of the bull. His followers practiced in secret, in underground chambers called *Mithraea*. These temples were dark, narrow—like wombs of stone. Initiates passed through trials of silence, blood, and vision. They believed Mithras held the cosmos in balance by slaying the primal beast.”

Dominic looked down. “Blood sacrifice.”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “And there were Mithraeum in Syria, in Dura-Europos—where they found one beside one of the oldest known Christian house-churches. The two coexisted, side by side. And though no one has yet uncovered one in Jerusalem itself, it is almost certain they were here. The legions came. They brought their rites. They whispered their words in the shadows beneath the very stones we now walk.”

Caterina looked unsettled. “And where are they now?”

“Still here,” Natan’el said. “I have seen their marks carved in old cisterns. I have met traders who bear the symbols of the sol invictus on their rings. Mithras was never fully banished. When Constantine converted and made the Christ god of the empire, the temples of the old gods were declared closed. But many simply moved deeper underground. The rites went inward. Like the Black Flame, they learned to wear other faces.”

Dominic’s voice was quiet. “So the empire never truly fell. It just hid itself.”

“Precisely,” Natan’el said. “The gods of Rome did not die. They became embedded. They entered the bloodstream of the Church, the rituals, the orders. Venus traded her name for the Madonna. Jupiter became the Father on the throne. Mithras wore the stole of a bishop. Even now, the worship continues—beneath the crypts, in chambers of stone, among men who call themselves faithful.”

He leaned forward, and his voice dropped lower.

“There are still Mithras worshippers in the Holy Land, Dominic. They do not wear togas or speak Latin. But they light the same fire, speak the same oaths. Some are scholars. Some are soldiers. Some walk freely in Jerusalem, masked by titles of state or faith. They are not gone. They wait.”

Caterina whispered, “For what?”

“For the return of empire,” Natan’el said, his voice like stone. “Not the Rome of maps, but of mind. The empire of order, silence, power. The god who demands the slaying of the bull—again and again.”

He looked to Dominic, his eyes sharp.

“You’ve seen the prison of the Vatican. You know the game. But the roots go deeper than Rome. The empire didn’t invent the lie. It only refined it. What walks in the daylight now was born in caverns long ago.”

Dominic felt the heat of the air pressing on his skin. The stones around them seemed heavier, older than before.

“And what of us?” he asked quietly.

Natan’el sat back, folding his arms.

“You do what you must. You walk with your eyes open. You question every voice that claims truth. You remember that behind every temple lies another one buried deeper. And above all—” he looked up at the sky, a single crow circling in the light—“you do not kneel to any god who demands silence, blood, or blindness.”

The courtyard returned to silence.

And the shadows around them felt a little longer than before.

Temple Mount

The sun had begun its slow descent toward the western hills, casting long golden streaks across the dome-strewn skyline of Jerusalem. The city seemed to breathe differently here, near the great open expanse of the Temple Mount. As they passed through the broad archways leading onto the sacred platform, the noise of the city faded behind them like a receding tide. The wind caught the edges of their robes, stirring the dust into soft spirals. Before them rose the shimmering Dome of the Rock, its gold dome ablaze in the dying light, glowing like a divine flame against the pale blue sky.

Near the base of the dome, in the shaded corner of the platform, a solitary man was sweeping the ground with deliberate grace, as if the act itself were a form of prayer. He wore simple linen robes—cream colored with a green sash—and his head was wrapped in a soft white turban. His beard was streaked with silver, and his dark eyes, though aged, shone with childlike warmth.

Natan’el raised a hand. “Peace upon you, Sheikh Omar!”

The man looked up, leaning slightly on his broom. A wide smile spread across his face, and he nodded, eyes flickering with mischief.

“Peace upon all who bring no dust to the heart,” he said. “But you—Natan’el—you bring guests.”

He stepped forward and narrowed his eyes at Caterina. His nose twitched.

“A woman,” he said, squinting. “And unveiled. Tsk-tsk.”

Caterina met his gaze without fear. “Do you fear the sight of truth, Sheikh?”

Omar barked a laugh, raising a hand. “No! Only the trouble it causes.”

Then he looked at her again, softer now. “Though your eyes are like verses hidden in a forgotten sura. Still—next time, a veil, for modesty’s sake, if not for mystery.”

Then he turned to Dominic, his smile deepening.

“And this,” he said, “must be the one.”

Natan’el stepped in. “Dominic. A traveler of books and blood. And Caterina—his companion in exile.”

Omar looked at Dominic for a long moment, then placed a hand over his heart.

“So you are my new brother,” he said. “One who has crossed from the house of words into the land of silence.”

Dominic bowed his head slightly. “I came seeking peace. I find riddles.”

“That is the scent of truth,” Omar said. Then, stepping back, he looked up toward the dome behind him and began to recite, his voice light but resonant:

*“Between the veils of sky and stone,
The Beloved hides, and we roam alone.
But every breath and every tear
Draws the lost one ever near.”*

He finished and bowed slightly toward the dome.

“A line from my own poor pen,” he said. “Unpublished, thankfully.”

Caterina smiled faintly. “It’s not poor. It breathes.”

Omar turned, gesturing for them to walk with him. “Come. Walk beneath the dome while the light is golden. This place listens. It may say something if we are quiet.”

They stepped slowly around the platform, past marble columns and carved inscriptions, the echo of their footsteps soft against the ancient stone.

“So, Dominic,” Omar said, “what do you believe now, having walked through temples, ruins, and tombs?”

Dominic was silent a moment. Then, “That religion is more often a fortress than a bridge. And that every name we give to the divine is another brick in a wall.”

Omar nodded. “Ah. A Gnostic.”

Natan’el grinned. “He’s still learning.”

“We all are,” Omar said. “The mistake is believing the learning ever ends.”

Caterina asked, “Do you follow the law of the Prophet, Sheikh?”

Omar smiled. “I follow the Beloved. The Prophet gave us a map, yes. But Sufis—we wander off the road now and then. We listen for music in the wind. Sometimes, we even dance.”

“And the law?” Dominic asked.

“The law is the cup,” Omar said, “but the wine is love. What good is the cup without the wine?”

He turned and looked at the Dome, glowing now in the amber haze of twilight.

“I keep this place,” he said. “I sweep it. I wash its stones. I watch men come with scrolls and claims, each certain he knows God best. But the rock beneath...” He tapped the floor with his

staff. “The rock remembers blood and silence. Abraham, David, Solomon, Jesus, Muhammad—all touched this place. And still, it does not speak.”

“But it listens?” asked Dominic.

“Oh yes,” Omar said. “It listens deeply. And sometimes—when the wind is still, and the heart is empty—it whispers.”

They stood together beneath the rising dome, the call to prayer faintly echoing from across the platform. Above them, stars were beginning to pierce the indigo sky, and the old stones waited for their voices to fall quiet.

Sheikh Omar leaned in closer to Dominic and whispered, “Not all who worship here serve the same master. Be careful where you place your feet, Brother. The ground is holy. But the hands that walk upon it are not always clean.”

Dominic nodded slowly, the meaning sinking in.

The dome above them shimmered, and the night began to fall.

The great golden dome towered above them as they stepped onto the marble platform, its radiant surface catching the last hues of the setting sun. The open courtyard that surrounded the Dome of the Rock was hushed now, emptied of most visitors, with only a few figures lingering in prayer or quiet conversation. The calm was sacred, touched with the strange weight of centuries. Dominic, Caterina, and Natan’el approached the entrance beneath a series of arches, passing under carved inscriptions that shimmered in gold and cobalt.

As they stepped inside, the scent of cedar and cool stone enveloped them.

The vast interior glowed with dim light reflected off colored mosaics and ancient columns. High above, the dome’s inner ceiling rose like the sky itself, its gold-leafed designs swirling into a kind of celestial geometry. And at the center of it all, the rock—uneven, raw, ancient—rose from the floor beneath a finely worked wooden screen, encircled by columns, mystery, and reverence.

Natan’el gestured with one hand as they entered, his voice low and deliberate.

“This Islamic holy place,” he said, “stands upon a site sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. To the Jews, this is Mount Moriah—the place where Abraham prepared to offer up his son Isaac. It is the same mountain upon which the First and Second Temples stood.”

He paused beside a column inscribed with Kufic script. His fingers brushed the cool surface.

“To Christians,” he continued, “this is where the Christ child was presented. Where He stood as a boy and questioned the teachers. Where He later prayed, taught, and drove out the money-changers. This stone, Caterina... Dominic... it remembers more footsteps than any other in Jerusalem.”

They moved slowly, reverently, around the central enclosure. The faint whisper of a caretaker's broom echoed from the far side.

"During the Crusades," Natan'el said with a wry smile, "this place was taken. Converted into a Christian church. For much of the twelfth century, the Dome of the Rock was rededicated to Christ. They named it *Templum Domini*. The Well of Souls below became a confessional. Strange, isn't it? The same space re-scripted again and again."

He chuckled softly. "And yes, some still call it the Mosque of Omar—though clearly not the Omar who sweeps the floor outside."

Dominic raised his eyes to the gleaming interior of the dome. "And for Muslims?"

Natan'el nodded solemnly. "For the followers of the Prophet, this is the place where Muhammad, peace be upon him, was taken up. The rock you see was the launching point of his *Isra and Mi'raj*—his Night Journey and ascension. He came here riding the winged steed *Al-Burak*, and from this very stone, he rose through the heavens, speaking with angels, prophets, and the Divine."

He pointed toward a cedar screen, delicately carved and darkened with age.

"That is from the twelfth century," he said. "It guards the rock. And over there—" he gestured to a reliquary placed reverently near the enclosure—"they say it holds a hair from the Prophet's beard."

Caterina circled slowly, her eyes wide. "The columns..." she whispered. "Some bear crosses."

"Taken from earlier churches," Natan'el said. "It was built by Caliph Abd al-Malik in the year 691. The artistry, the detail—you'll notice much of it is Byzantine. Syrian Christian artisans laid the mosaics. And the architecture? It speaks many languages."

They walked together toward the southern side of the rock. Steps descended there into a dim cave—the Well of Souls—where ancient legends still breathed.

"Below us now," Natan'el said, "is the chamber of the soul's waiting. The Jews say this is where the spirits of the dead linger until the coming of the Messiah. The Muslims say it is the place where the spirits hear the footsteps of the righteous above. It has been called many names. The Crusaders used it for confession. The Arabs call it *Bir al-Arwah*."

They turned back toward the inner arcade where a long band of script wrapped the interior in an endless golden line.

"This inscription," Natan'el said, "is older than any in Arabic script. It runs for two hundred and forty meters, a single thread of Kufic calligraphy. And it does not whisper. It speaks boldly."

He pointed toward a section, then recited slowly:

‘O People of the Book, overstep not bounds in your religion, and of God speak only the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God... Say not ‘Three’. It is better for you. God is only one God. Far be it from His glory that He should have a son.’

Caterina listened, her eyes still on the gold and lapis tiles. “A challenge.”

“A declaration,” Natan’el said. “Abd al-Malik, some say, did not only want to honor the Prophet’s journey—he wished to challenge the Christian world. He feared the dome of the Holy Sepulchre dazzled the minds of Muslims, so he raised his own dome—one more radiant, more central, more eternal.”

Dominic stepped toward the central rock. “And now they all stand. All the temples, churches, and mosques. Layered. Conflicting. Overlapping.”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “Each claiming light. Each casting shadow.”

The silence returned, broken only by the sound of their footsteps on stone.

Then Omar’s voice echoed faintly from the entrance behind them, calling:

“Do not stay too long! The stones will speak secrets you may not want to hear!”

Natan’el smiled. “Let them speak.”

And together, they stood around the stone—three seekers, none bound by a single name for the divine—listening to the silence of the rock.

The sky over Jerusalem had turned to copper and violet, the last embers of daylight sinking behind the hills as the party made their way back through the winding alleys of the Armenian Quarter. The stones still radiated heat from the long day, but a cool breeze now wove its way through the narrow passageways, bringing with it the scent of garden herbs and woodsmoke.

By the time they reached Natan’el’s home, the city had grown quiet, save for the distant murmur of prayers and the soft clinking of pottery from nearby kitchens. The door creaked open, and a wave of stillness welcomed them inside—thick stone walls, faded woven rugs, and shelves cluttered with scrolls, spices, and strange trinkets from years past.

Without a word, Natan’el moved to the small kitchen alcove and tied a faded cloth around his waist. He opened a low cupboard, revealing a clay jar of cracked wheat, a bowl of dried apricots, and a small bag of pine nuts. Caterina joined him at the hearth, rolling up her sleeves and watching closely.

“We’ll make *ghapama*,” Natan’el said. “Stuffed pumpkin, but with what we have—no pumpkin, so we use eggplant. Improvised, like all good things.”

He handed her a carved wooden spoon and poured the bulgur into a bowl. “Wash this with cold water, then soak it.”

Caterina nodded, already immersed in the rhythm of the kitchen. She worked silently beside him, slicing dried fruit, grinding black pepper and cinnamon in a stone mortar, while Natan'el chopped onions and garlic with a curved iron knife worn smooth from use.

He hummed softly as he cooked, a melody that sounded old, perhaps Armenian, perhaps older still. He fried the onions until golden, then stirred them into the bulgur with apricots, crushed walnuts, mint, and just a touch of honey. The hollowed eggplants were roasted and filled with the mixture, then set to bake in a clay pot over the embers.

Dominic sat nearby, his legs stretched out on the woven mat, watching with quiet contentment. The scent of roasted fruit and spice filled the small home, warming it like a hearth from within.

When the meal was ready, they gathered around the low table. Natan'el placed the steaming pot in the center, pulled apart flatbread with his hands, and served the eggplant parcels onto each plate.

"To the sacred act of breaking bread," he said, raising a cup of water.

They ate slowly, savoring the balance of sweet and savory, the softness of the fruit against the earthiness of the grain. Between bites, laughter came easily. Caterina told a story of her first attempt to cook for her abbess back in Naples—burnt lentils and all. Natan'el countered with a tale of mistaking dried figs for dates and accidentally ruining an entire feast for a visiting bishop.

Dominic smiled through it all. He chewed, listened, and watched. Something had softened in him—a tension that had held since Rome, now eased by the scent of spice, the warmth of food, the sound of honest laughter.

When the plates were cleared and the fire low, Natan'el prepared the water pipe—an old ceramic shisha with etched designs of birds and fig trees. He filled the bowl with sweet tobacco laced with clove and a touch of rosewater.

They passed the pipe between them, inhaling gently, the fragrant smoke curling in the candlelight.

"This tastes like a memory," Caterina said, leaning back against a pillow.

"Then it's working," Natan'el replied, exhaling a soft plume. "Memories are the seasoning of the soul."

Next came the coffee—thick, dark, and bitter, boiled in a long-handled pot over the embers, then poured into tiny cups rimmed with brass.

Dominic lifted his to Natan'el. "We are forever in your debt, brother."

Natan'el looked up, the firelight dancing in his eyes. "No," he said. "This is what the Order of Gnostic Brothers is for. We help each other. We are blood—if not by birth, then by light."

He drank, the silence between them turning warm and easy.

“Jerusalem is not kind to strangers,” he continued. “But you are no longer strangers. This home is yours.”

They sat long into the night, speaking of lighter things—the oddities of pilgrims, the quirks of languages, the way dreams sometimes echo louder in old cities. Outside, the wind whispered through the cracks in the stone, and the city seemed to rest at last.

Dominic looked at Caterina, who was half-asleep, smiling behind her coffee cup. He turned to Natan’el, pipe in hand, and nodded.

They had found a friend. Not just a host, but a brother in a land where truth and deception wore the same face.

And beneath the smoke and the warmth of the night, trust had taken root.

The Cave

Before the first call of the muezzin, before even the pale silver of dawn touched the sky, they were already awake. The house lay in stillness, the hearth cold, the night holding its breath outside the shuttered windows. Inside, Natan’el moved with quiet precision, lighting a small oil lamp and setting it on the low table. He wore a simple tunic of undyed linen, his face solemn, his movements purposeful.

Dominic and Caterina rose wordlessly, drawn by the weight of intention in the air. There was no need for conversation; something sacred was beginning.

Natan’el handed Dominic a folded bundle of white hooded robes—heavy, clean, and fragrant with old cedar.

Dominic took them reverently, wrapping them in a cloth bag along with the items Natan’el placed next: a narrow, aged book bound in lambskin, its pages thick with age and ink. A flask of deep red wine, sealed with wax. And finally, a torch wrapped in dry linen and a flint striker.

“Do not speak,” Natan’el whispered. “Not until the rite begins.”

They left the house in silence, the sky above still cloaked in shadow.

Jerusalem behind them was quiet, its towers and domes like sleeping giants. They passed beneath old arches and out through the broken edge of an old Roman wall, heading eastward into the hills. The only sounds were the crunch of sandals on dirt and the occasional call of a desert bird.

After nearly an hour, Natan'el raised a hand, signaling them to stop. Before them, embedded in the sandstone cliffs, was a dark slit—an opening high above ground level. A series of hand- and footholds carved long ago into the rock led upward. One by one, they climbed.

The cave opened wide once inside—a natural dome above, the walls veined with ancient soot and strange etchings. The air was cool, dry, and still. Natan'el struck flint, and the torch flared to life, casting golden light across the rough-hewn floor. In the center of the chamber was a stone niche, carved to hold the flame. He placed the torch there.

They waited.

Soon, shadows appeared at the cave entrance, climbing silently, robes shifting in the dark. One by one they entered, each cloaked in white:

Brother Stephanos of Antioch—his Greek accent soft, eyes always scanning the edges of things.

Miriam of Sidon—her face lined but calm, with a pouch of herbs at her belt.

Father Mattai of Edessa—bent slightly, with a wooden staff and a calm, strange light in his eyes.

Yusuf al-Harrani—whose red sash identified him beneath the robe.

And lastly, Helena bat Shimon—carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle of scrolls tied with twine.

They greeted each other only with glances and nods and dressed into white robes. Then they formed a circle around the torch, seated cross-legged in the dust, robes pooling around them like snow.

Mattai opened the book Dominic had brought. His voice was low, resonant, in a dialect of Syriac mixed with Greek:

“I am the light that shines in the darkness.

I am the knowing within the unknowable.

I was before flesh, and I shall be when flesh dissolves.

He who formed the world is blind.

He sees not the realm of Truth, only shadow upon shadow.

But within each of us, the seed remains.

Not made by the false creator, but planted by the Silence beyond stars.”

He paused. The cave seemed to hold its breath.

Miriam uncorked the flask of wine and poured it into a golden cup etched with symbols—stars, a spiral, a pair of wings. Into the wine, she crumbled herbs from her pouch—sweet, pungent, calming. She stirred it with her finger, then raised it to her lips and drank.

She passed it to her left. One by one, each drank. When it reached Dominic, the taste surprised him—bitter at first, then suddenly sweet and deep, like honey mixed with desert earth. Warmth spread through his chest and into his limbs. His thoughts slowed. The tight coil of his mind gently loosened.

The cup made its way around the circle.

Then Stephanos began a chant, eyes closed, voice low and steady. The others followed, the chant growing like a tide. Dominic and Caterina listened first, then slowly joined in, mimicking the syllables:

“Ayin, Sof, Shalem,
Light beyond light, Flame without name.
Formless One, call us home.
Break the wheel, burn the chain.”

The chant repeated. Slowly. Unchanging. The sound was soft but powerful, like waves on stone. Time seemed to unravel in the echoing cave. The torch flickered and cast the shadows of the Brotherhood across the walls—long, dancing, ancient.

Then the chanting stopped.

Silence fell.

No one spoke. No one moved.

They simply sat—breathing in unison, their faces calm, eyes closed. The torch hissed gently in the cradle of stone. The taste of wine lingered. The herbs lulled the mind into openness.

Dominic felt himself drift inward—not sleep, not thought, but a stillness behind all movement. Images rose without warning: a river of stars, a door without hinges, a voice that spoke in no words. He felt Caterina’s presence beside him—not as a body, but as a light. A twin ember.

This was not prayer. This was not worship.

This was *returning*.

They sat like that for a long while, in the sacred hush of the ancient earth, each seeking not outside, but within.

And the cave, older than temples, older than texts, held their silence with reverence.

The cave walls held their silence a little longer after the meditation ended, as if reluctant to release what had been spoken through silence. Slowly, gently, the circle stirred. One by one, they opened their eyes—not with the sharpness of waking from sleep, but with the calm alertness of returning from somewhere deeper.

Natan’el gave a subtle nod, and all began to rise. No words were exchanged. Only shared understanding.

They stood, stretching quietly, then began to remove their white robes. The fabric rustled softly as each member folded their garment and placed it aside, revealing the more ordinary

clothes beneath. There was no ritual in this—only reverence. The symbols of the rite had served their purpose.

Natan’el stepped to the center, removed the torch from its stone cradle, and gently snuffed it with a damp cloth. The cave dimmed, shadows thickening once more. He packed the torch, the robes, the book, and the golden cup into his cloth satchel with care, then slung it over his shoulder.

Outside, the horizon had begun to brighten with the faintest gray. They climbed down the sandstone, one after another, hands gripping time-smoothed grooves in the cliff. The cool air of early dawn kissed their faces, and the night winds had begun to die. The others offered brief farewells—nods, touches to the heart, murmured blessings—and then melted into the land, taking hidden paths back to their quarters.

Only Dominic, Caterina, and Natan’el remained.

They walked in silence at first, feet finding the familiar trail beneath them, now barely visible in the growing light. After an hour, the city returned to view—its domes and towers dark against the pale wash of dawn. But before they reached its gates, they came upon a ridge lined with olive trees—some twisted and ancient, others young and growing between stones.

They had reached the Mount of Olives.

Natan’el stopped, setting his bag down beside a tree. His eyes turned toward the city across the valley.

“This,” he said, “is where He left.”

Dominic looked toward the rising skyline of Jerusalem, glowing faintly with the new day. “Christ?”

Natan’el nodded. “Yes. After the crucifixion, He was not seen as a ghost or vision, but as a teacher. For forty days He walked among His disciples—though not as before. They say He could pass through walls, appear in different forms. He was light, but still had flesh. The Gospels call Him risen. But those who see deeper say He was transfigured.”

Caterina crossed her arms, watching the sun rise behind the hills. “And He ascended?”

“From this mountain,” Natan’el said. “Here, where we now stand. He brought them to the summit, and then—He vanished from their sight. Some say into the clouds. Others say into the deeper light—the realm from which He came.”

He paused, his gaze fixed on the city.

“But listen well. This was not the end. It was the return. The resurrection was never about the body. It was about the *spark*—the divine fragment breaking free of the cage.”

Dominic watched him. “So He overcame the Demiurge.”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “The crucifixion was the final trap of the false creator. Pain, fear, death—those are his tools. But the Christ broke them. Not by force, but by passing through without resistance. He showed that the flesh, the suffering, the cross—it was all illusion. He walked through death like a man walking through a curtain.”

“And the resurrection?” Caterina asked.

“Not a miracle of bones,” Natan’el said. “A sign. That within each of us is the same flame. Dormant, but real. The Christ of the Gnostics was not sent to redeem sin. He was sent to *remind*—to awaken what the Demiurge tried to bury.”

He turned to Dominic.

“Think of what He did after He rose: He taught. He explained the mysteries. The *Apocryphon of John* says He revealed the names of the archons, the rulers of this world, and how to escape them. He didn't go to the temple. He didn't call for war. He gave keys to those who could understand.”

“And then?” Dominic asked.

“Then He returned to the realm of Light. Back to the *pleroma*—the fullness. Leaving behind a path. Not a religion, but a memory.”

Caterina stood quietly between the trees, the wind brushing her cloak.

“Do people still believe this?” she asked.

“A few,” Natan’el said. “Most see only the surface—the cross, the tomb, the rites. But those who know... we gather in caves, in ruins and hidden rooms. We keep the fire.”

The sun broke fully above the hills then, casting light over the Temple Mount, the domes of Jerusalem glittering in morning gold.

Dominic closed his eyes.

And in that light, he did not see death or dogma.

He saw a path.

A narrow one.

But it was real.

The morning light poured through the narrow windows of Natan’el’s home, filtering in soft and gold, tracing stripes across the stone floor. The city had awakened, but inside the house, time moved more slowly. Caterina, wrapped in a shawl and humming a half-forgotten hymn from her convent days, moved about the small kitchen with ease. The hearth crackled with fresh flame, and a pot of porridge simmered with cracked wheat, cinnamon, and a handful of dried figs.

Dominic sat at the low table, sipping hot water infused with mint, watching her. A strange warmth stirred in his chest. She moved as if she had always belonged here—no longer the silent exile, but a woman who had laid claim to her own space.

Natan’el entered from the back room, rubbing his hands dry on a cloth.

“You’ve settled in well,” he said to Caterina, smiling.

“I like feeding the hungry,” she said, not looking up from her stirring. “It’s good work.”

They ate together, quietly. The porridge was thick and sweet, filling without heaviness. Afterward, as the bowls were cleared, Natan’el grew more serious. He turned to Dominic, his voice low and deliberate.

“There is something I need you to do.”

Dominic leaned in slightly.

Natan’el stood, crossed the room to an old wooden chest beneath a woven rug, and opened it with an iron key. From within, he removed a carefully folded set of black robes—a Greek Orthodox monk’s habit, complete with head covering and a leather cord belt.

“You’ll wear this,” he said, handing the clothes to Dominic.

“For what?”

“There’s a cross,” Natan’el said. “Not just any relic. It was once known as the *Crux Lucis Obscura*—the Cross of Hidden Light. It was crafted in Constantinople, taken during the Fourth Crusade, passed through hands both sacred and profane. Now it rests in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It has markings hidden beneath the silver—gnostic sigils that map out the star path of the soul. We need it back. It belongs to the Brotherhood.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed. “You want me to steal from the altar?”

Natan’el’s expression was calm. “From those who stole it first.”

There was silence. Then Dominic took the robes and nodded.

A few hours later, he emerged from the back room fully dressed in the monk’s garments. The rough wool was hot, the head covering stifling, but the disguise was complete. Natan’el gave him a folded scrap of bread, a wineskin, and the blessing of silence.

He stepped out into the sun.

The city breathed with life.

The streets of Jerusalem bustled with merchants hawking lemons, dried dates, and strips of salted fish. Children darted between donkeys laden with grain. A group of pilgrims sang softly in Latin near the entrance to a small chapel. The scent of fresh bread mingled with the sharper tang of dung and sweat. Vendors shouted prices in Arabic, Greek, and Armenian. The

buildings leaned toward one another like old friends—stone upon stone, balconies trailing vines and draped linens swaying in the breeze.

Dominic walked with his head lowered, the monk's hood casting shadow over his features. He moved with purpose, blending in among other clergy and pilgrims. His feet carried him south, toward Bethlehem.

The road was quiet outside the city walls, then grew louder again as he entered the stone streets near the Church of the Nativity. There, pilgrims gathered in clusters, many speaking Greek or Latin, others Aramaic or Italian. Local guides gestured with walking sticks and shouted dates into the dusty air.

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At the entrance to the church, the stone arch lowered dramatically, forcing all to bow as they passed through the tiny Door of Humility.

Inside, coolness and shadow welcomed him. Candles flickered along the walls. The scent of oil, sweat, and old stone lingered. Dominic merged into a group of pilgrims, all bowing and whispering to one another.

“Is this where He was born?”

“Yes, beneath the altar—there’s a silver star on the floor.”

“I heard a priest say the Greeks will not let the Latins clean the floor.”

“Hush. Just be thankful we can pray here.”

Dominic kept his hands folded and his eyes low, but every few moments, he glanced up toward the high altar. There it stood: the Crux Lucis Obscura. A silver cross mounted behind

a veil of incense smoke, its arms etched with Byzantine flourishes. He could almost feel it vibrating—calling.

He watched. Waited.

A priest moved toward the nave. Two pilgrims began praying aloud in Latin. A third knelt to light a candle and dropped it, drawing the attention of a nearby cleric.

Now.

Dominic stepped past the velvet rope, quick but not hurried, as if performing a simple monastic duty. He reached out, hands steady, and took the cross from its stand. It was lighter than he expected. He slipped it beneath his robe, into the cloth satchel tied at his waist, and turned.

No one called out. No alarm. Just the continued hum of whispered prayers.

He walked back the way he came, past the votive candles, past the stone arch, bowing once more as he exited through the low door into the burning sun.

The road back to Jerusalem passed like a dream. He said nothing. He thought only once:

I should feel shame. But I don't. This isn't theft. This is a return.

By late afternoon, he arrived at Natan'el's home once more. Caterina looked up from washing herbs as he entered. Natan'el stood from the corner, dusting crumbs from his hands.

Dominic removed the cross from beneath his robe and placed it on the table.

Natan'el stared at it for a long moment, then nodded and carried it reverently to the wooden chest. He opened it, placed the cross inside, and locked it with the same iron key.

"We have it now," he said. "Another piece returned to the Light."

Dominic removed the monk's robe, exhaled, and sat down. Caterina handed him a cool cup of water.

"You did well," she said.

And for the first time since Rome, Dominic smiled.

The next morning, before the city stirred, Dominic, Caterina, and Natan'el set out once again through the winding alleys and beyond the outer walls of Jerusalem, returning to the cave sanctuary hidden in the sandstone cliffs. They moved silently, their feet guided by memory and purpose, the morning sky still heavy with the last breath of night.

The others were already gathering by the time they reached the cave. Helena, Yusuf, Miriam, Stephanos, and Father Mattai stood in white robes near the entrance, speaking in hushed tones. The torchlight glowed softly within, flickering against the smooth walls like dancing spirits.

Inside, the central chamber was already prepared. In the heart of the cave, beneath the high arched dome of sandstone, stood a stone altar—carved centuries ago directly from the rock. Upon its face was a great symbol, etched with delicate precision: a radiant sunburst with lines emanating in every direction, a symbol of light beyond the created world.

Natan’el stepped forward and, from within his satchel, withdrew the relic: the Crux Lucis Obscura. The silver glinted softly in the firelight as he placed it with reverence upon the altar.

The Brotherhood formed a circle once more, surrounding the flame and the cross. Natan’el lit the central torch, placing it into the stone cradle above the altar. Shadows climbed the walls, and their forms merged in rhythm.

White robes were pulled on, hoods raised, silence descending like sacred breath.

Mattai opened the Book of Gnosis, unrolling a parchment as he began to recite:

“From the Light came the Word,
And the Word knew not the flesh.
But the flesh clothed the spark,
And the spark wandered through ages of blindness.
Only those who remember,
Who see the light behind the veil,
Will awaken from the sleep of the world.”

The chanting began slowly. Ancient syllables echoed in the circular space:

“Aon, Pneuma, Eleos, Thelema...
Break the wheel, burn the chain,
Let the flame rise from the stone.”

Dominic and Caterina joined in—no longer hesitant. The words came easier now, the cadence familiar. Dominic’s memory absorbed every phrase, every symbol carved on the wall, every chant and prayer. Each day with the Brotherhood had etched a new layer into his understanding, peeling away the lies he once believed sacred.

When the chant faded, silence fell like a soft mantle over the circle. They sat, as before, eyes closed, listening not with ears but with something deeper—something forgotten but not lost.

When the rite was complete, Natan’el extinguished the torch, and the Brotherhood slowly removed their robes. The Crux Lucis Obscura was wrapped in silk once more and returned to Natan’el’s satchel. A few words were exchanged—blessings, nods, the warmth of shared light—and then the group dispersed, vanishing back into the folds of the waking world.

As they walked back toward the city, Dominic felt a profound stillness within him. Jerusalem appeared on the horizon again, its golden rooftops glowing in the rising sun.

They stopped at the Mount of Olives to rest briefly beneath the shade of an old olive tree. Natan’el, sitting cross-legged on the stone, turned to Dominic and Caterina.

“There’s something else you should know,” he said. “Beneath Jerusalem lies an older city—older than the Romans, older than David. Catacombs carved in the days of Canaan. Before the temples, before the kings.”

Dominic looked up. “You’ve been down there?”

“Twice,” Natan’el said. “Not far. Many passages are collapsed or sealed. But some remain open... and dangerous. They were once chambers of Baal worship—altars of fire, blood pits, serpentine halls. The priests of the old gods didn’t leave quietly. And not all of their spirits were banished.”

“People go there now?” asked Caterina.

“Sometimes,” he said. “Curious souls. Grave robbers. Pilgrims of madness. And worse—members of the Black Flame have been known to perform their rites below. They slip through tunnels beneath the city, appearing and vanishing like shadows.”

Dominic nodded slowly. “You’ll show us one day?”

“When the time is right,” Natan’el replied. “When you know what you’re looking at.”

He paused, then added, “But there’s one place I *will* show you soon. Another place of stone. Older than most believe. *Zedekiah’s Cave*.”

Dominic leaned in.

“It lies beneath the Muslim Quarter,” Natan’el continued. “Five acres of underground corridors—what remains of the great quarry used by Solomon, by Herod. Some say even the First Temple’s stones came from there. The cave runs the length of five city blocks. Only its mouth is natural. The rest—hewn by hands over thousands of years.”

He looked toward the north. “The entrance is near the Damascus Gate. Narrow at first, but then it opens into a chamber like a buried cathedral—three hundred feet across. The roof weeps water. *Zedekiah’s Tears*, they call it.”

“Why that name?” Caterina asked.

“Because legend says Zedekiah, last king of Judah, fled through a hidden tunnel from the palace, running from Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers. God sent a buck above him—on the surface—its hooves echoing through the cave. The soldiers followed the sound... and captured him at the far end. There they blinded him. And the cave has never forgotten.”

He stood, brushing dust from his robe.

“In those galleries, you’ll find stones half-carved, left behind as if the workers fled mid-stroke. Marks in Latin, Greek, Arabic, Armenian—each civilization leaving something behind. The deeper you go, the stranger it gets. Some say the cave was cursed after Korah’s rebellion—when the earth swallowed him and his men alive. The *people slain by Moses*, buried not in graves, but in the very veins of the earth.”

Caterina looked pale. “Demons?”

“They are there,” Natan’el said simply. “Some whisper. Some sleep. Some still feed. You’ll feel them before you see them. If you see them at all.”

Dominic exhaled slowly. “And yet we will go?”

“Yes,” Natan’el said. “Because down there, beneath centuries of lies, are truths that were buried too deep to be destroyed. But first, you must be ready. You must carry light that won’t be extinguished in the dark.”

They resumed their walk toward the city, the rising sun at their backs, and the memory of ancient caves stirring beneath their feet.

The sun was high by the time they descended from the Mount of Olives and reached the edge of Jerusalem’s market district. A dense, warm wind blew through the alleys, carrying the scent of cumin, figs, and fresh olives. The marketplace, laid out beneath canvas awnings and carved stone arches, was alive with noise—voices calling out prices in a dozen languages, merchants clapping hands to summon attention, baskets thudding against tables.

Dominic, Caterina, and Natan’el made their way through the maze of stalls. Colors bloomed on every side—piles of pomegranates glistening like jewels, sacks of lentils and saffron, bundles of green herbs still damp with morning dew. Fishmongers waved wicker baskets of silver-scaled catch freshly hauled from Jaffa’s coast, their voices sharp and melodic.

“This one,” Natan’el said, pointing to a stand shaded by palm fronds. “He always has the best.”

They approached a weathered old man sitting beside a basin of fish packed in salt. Natan’el picked out three, inspecting the eyes, the gills, and the firmness of the flesh.

“Clean,” he muttered. “Fresh.”

A few stalls down, Caterina selected onions, eggplants, and a sprig of mint. The vendor, a young woman with braided hair and a cheerful face, offered them a handful of dried apricots with a wink.

They bartered, exchanged coin, and made their way back through the hum of voices and the tapestry of smells. Once home, they laid out their bounty on the kitchen slab. Caterina, already familiar with the rhythm of the place, took the lead. She scaled and gutted the fish with a steady hand while Natan’el ground cumin and coriander in a stone mortar.

Olive oil hissed as it hit the hot pan. Eggplants roasted over open flame until their skins blackened and peeled away. Fish was pan-fried with garlic and lemon. Warm flatbread was torn into thick pieces, placed in a basket, and dusted with sumac.

By early afternoon, they were seated at the low table, eating with their fingers, dipping bread into soft vegetables and lemony oil. The meal was quiet and good, a brief peace carved from a city of watchful eyes and ancient threats.

Later, as the sun began to dim in the west, they lit the waterpipe. The air filled with smoke tinged with clove and rosewater. Wine was poured—dark, earthy, strong. The old scroll was unrolled once more, and Natan’el read from the *Book of Gnosis*, his voice rhythmic, laced with ancient cadence:

“The body is a garment, woven by the hand of the false maker.
He stitched hunger into the belly, and fear into the bones.
But within the shell burns the shard of the True Flame.
It cannot be smothered, only forgotten.
To awaken is to peel back the veil—to see that death is but the last lie.”

He sipped his wine and continued:

“The archons rule the world of forms.
They whisper to kings, to priests, to the cruel-hearted.
But the Gnostic walks unseen,
Shielded not by sword, but by vision.”

Dominic sat listening, each word sinking into him like old truth rediscovered. Caterina watched the flame of the oil lamp, her fingers resting lightly on the rim of her cup.

Then Natan’el stood and crossed to the wooden chest at the back of the room. He opened it slowly and removed two wrapped bundles. When unrolled, they revealed daggers—slim, sharp, curved slightly inward at the tip. The blades had a faint shimmer to them, like water frozen in motion.

“These,” he said, “belong to the Order. Carried only by those who know when not to use them.”

He pulled back his cloak and revealed his own dagger, sheathed at his waist, hidden beneath his robes.

“Jerusalem is not safe,” he said. “Even for the righteous. Perhaps *especially* not for the righteous. There are eyes in every quarter, ears behind every curtain. You will need these.”

He handed one dagger to Dominic, the other to Caterina.

“They are not for vengeance,” he said. “Nor for murder. They are for ending what must not continue.”

Dominic held the blade in his hand, testing its weight.

Natan’el stepped back and drew his blade, slicing the air in front of him.

“There are only a few spots you aim for,” he said. “Soft places. The neck, just beneath the jaw. The ribs—between the third and fourth. The base of the spine. And if you must, here—” he tapped the underside of the arm. “They bleed out fast.”

He demonstrated movements—simple, effective. Parry, stab, twist. Then again, slower, showing the motion from the elbow, not the wrist.

They spent hours practicing in the courtyard. Dust rose with every step. Caterina’s footwork became sure. Dominic’s strikes were quick, deliberate.

After a pause, Dominic stepped forward.

“I was trained to wrestle by my father,” he said. “My brothers believed that grappling prepared the mind to overcome the self. I’ll show you a hold that forces your enemy to the ground.”

He demonstrated on Natan’el—gently but firmly—twisting the shoulder, bringing the arm across the back.

Caterina smiled, then tried it herself on Dominic. He let her pin him.

Natan’el laughed. “You’ll make a formidable Gnostic yet.”

Dominic wiped sweat from his brow. “Every brother must know how to defend truth. A blade in the dark or an arm around the throat—whatever the moment requires.”

They returned inside as dusk fell, sore but invigorated. The blades were wiped clean, oiled, and sheathed. The house dimmed, the wine warmed again.

Outside, the city carried on—unaware that in a quiet house of the Armenian Quarter, two more guardians of the hidden Light had just been born.

Zedekiah’s Cave

The morning air carried both silence and anticipation as Dominic, Natan’el, and Caterina made their way from the house toward Zedekiah’s Cave. Their boots echoed on the worn stones of the Muslim Quarter, moving beneath the city’s veil of slumber. They crossed through an old gate near Damascus Gate and descended into the cavernous mouth of Solomon’s Quarries, the entrance nearly swallowed by time and shadows.

Inside, torchlight revealed the vast 300-foot-long chamber with its vaulted roof and water droplets—*Zedekiah’s Tears*—trickling from above. The walls were carved into endless galleries, paths leading deeper into darkness. Chisel marks were visible; unfinished blocks remained embedded in the rock—measurements, languages, and graffiti etched into stone: Arabic, Greek, Armenian, even Latin.

They explored, pausing at carved symbols: a bull reminiscent of the Mithraic cult, geometric forms echoing Temple-era layout, carvings of stylized menorahs with interwoven lines—perhaps early Jewish artisans marking territory. Dominic traced the symbols with a reverent fingertip.

Then Natan’el led them to a shadow-drenched niche in a distant gallery corner. There, illuminated by a torch flicker, was the most striking of all: a sunburst symbol, identical in radiance and design to the one carved above their secret cave altar.

Natan’el’s voice trembled softly. “The forefathers of Gnosis,” he murmured. “They were here.” He placed his palm near the mark, honoring those ancient carvers.

As they continued deeper, an elderly man emerged from the gloom. His robes were worn and travel-stained. He smiled gently, seeing them pause before the sunburst.

“Few know what this represents,” the old man said quietly. “Why pause at that mark?”

Natan’el stepped forward. “Who honors that symbol?”

The stranger bowed slightly. “I do. My name is Eustace of Gascony.”

Natan’el’s eyes lit. “From Gascony? Here?”

Eustace nodded. “This mark... only seekers of Light would remember it.”

Recognition passed between Natan’el and Dominic. Natan’el placed a hand gently on Eustace’s shoulder. “Brother,” he said softly. “We are Gnostics.”

Eustace’s smile deepened. “A fellow child of Light, then. I belong to the Order of Templars.”

Caterina, curious, asked, “We thought the Templars were all gone.”

Eustace looked at them calmly. “Most were. I am among the last—of the Knight Templars. We survived in whispers, hidden. We were Gnostics too—custodians of secrets, not soldiers.”

Dominic’s voice trembled with astonishment. “You—Templars. Here. And alive.”

Eustace nodded. “We kept the Cross, the Grail legends. Symbols, yes—but deeper truths.”

Natan’el clasped his shoulder. “Brothers of Light must stay united.”

The four of them lingered, speaking softly of ancient mysteries, echoes of the Temple, the nature of the archons, the hidden paths to Light. Eustace’s knowledge proved deep, polished by centuries of solitude.

Eventually Eustace smiled. “This night has been long. Come—join me for dinner at my home in the Muslim Quarter. We will speak more of Light—and how to keep it alive.”

Natan’el nodded. “With gratitude.”

They emerged from Zedekiah's Cave under a sky tipped toward dusk, joined now not just by memory—but by a living link to the vanished secret Order of the Temple.

They walked together through the winding streets of the Muslim Quarter, their footsteps echoing softly in the fading light. Eustace led the way, his gait slow but sure, his presence steady like a man who had known many roads and carried centuries in his bones. The air carried the scent of baked bread, spiced lamb, and the distant sound of a flute from a rooftop.

Children darted past them with laughter in their eyes, and the occasional mule trudged by with baskets of figs and lentils slung over its sides. The narrow alleys opened at last into a small courtyard shaded by a fig tree, where a modest stone house rested quietly against the city wall. Its exterior was unremarkable—aged limestone, a small arched door, and a faded wooden lintel carved with a faint cross and sunburst symbol.

Eustace opened the door and motioned them in.

“Please, come,” he said. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Inside, the room was warm with the scent of burning herbs. A simple hearth glowed with low coals. Tapestries hung from the stone walls, some bearing Christian symbols, others geometric patterns that hinted at deeper meanings. Candles in iron holders flickered, casting a golden hue over the room.

They gathered around a low table. Eustace placed a dish of oat cookies dusted with crushed sesame, slices of salted lamb preserved in oil, and a pot of spiced tea steaming gently. The fragrance of cardamom and clove filled the space.

“Eat,” he said. “And speak freely. Few ears here understand what we are.”

As they took food and drink, the conversation turned.

“I’ve never met a Templar,” Dominic said, sipping the tea.

Eustace gave a soft chuckle. “Nor have most people. The name is all that remains in the world—burned into the memory of the Church like a curse. But we were never the heretics they claimed.”

“What happened?” asked Caterina, curious.

Eustace leaned back, the candlelight dancing in his tired eyes.

“Jealousy. Power. In 1307, under pressure from Philip of France and the Pope, the Order was accused of heresy. We were tortured, executed, scattered. But they feared us not because we betrayed Christ—but because we searched for the Christ they could not control. The Christ of Light, not of Thrones.”

“They feared your knowledge,” Natan’el said.

Eustace nodded. “Yes. We held texts in languages they couldn’t read. Gospels that spoke not of judgment and wrath, but of the divine spark within all things. We preserved the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the writings of Basilides. They wanted none of it.”

Dominic leaned in. “Did the Templars practice Gnosis openly?”

“Some did,” said Eustace. “In secret circles, far from the reach of Rome. Others knew only fragments. But a few of us... we understood. That the god of the Old Testament was not the Source. That the Christ who walked among men came not from that god, but from the Light beyond.”

“The Demiurge,” murmured Caterina.

“Exactly,” Eustace said, looking at her. “And the Church still serves it. In their lust for gold, blood, control—they echo the archons who rule this world.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the soft sound of crackling fire surrounding them.

“We have lived through the fall of Byzantium,” Eustace continued, “and watched the Ottomans rise. They are strong, yes, and disciplined. But they too serve a worldly order. Their Sufi poets come closer to truth than their imams. Mevlana... Rumi... these are lights hidden within the veil.”

“The Ottomans tolerate the Christians and Jews, but only within the cage,” said Natan’el. “And always watched.”

“As it ever was,” Eustace said. “Whether Rome, Byzantium, or the Sultan’s crescent, the world belongs to the blind.”

Dominic nodded slowly. “But the Light remains.”

Eustace smiled. “It always does.”

He poured them more tea.

“Here, we speak. We remember. And we wait. The world may burn, kingdoms fall, churches rise and rot—but the Gnostic Brotherhood endures. In caves, in the heart of the forgotten.”

“And we’ve found one another,” said Natan’el. “That is no small thing.”

Eustace raised his cup.

“To the Light,” he said.

They all drank.

And for a time, in that quiet house beneath the walls of Jerusalem, the past and the present folded together, and four souls born of different lands sat as one—united not by creed, but by the burning thread of Gnosis that refused to be extinguished.

They lingered in the small courtyard beneath the fig tree for a moment, the air stilling around them. Then Natan'el placed a hand lightly on Eustace's shoulder.

"We will come again," he said. "Our paths are joined now, and the light between our Orders must not fade."

Eustace's eyes glowed. "The house is open to you. We strengthen each other by the fellowship of Light."

Caterina offered a nod of gratitude. "Thank you, brother."

With warmth and silent gratitude lingering between them, the small party took their leave and made their way back through the winding alleys, the hush of night settling around their footsteps.

Later that evening, as the moon rose pale over Jerusalem, Dominic and Caterina slipped quietly from Natan'el's house once more, heading for the market to gather provisions for the following day. The streets were mostly empty—homes shuttered, candles glimmering behind narrow windows. The night air was cool, the only sounds the occasional drip of water from a rooftop channel and the faint murmurs of distant worship.

In a deserted alleyway, faint lamplight revealed a hooded figure stepping from a darkened corner. Chillingly, he carried a wooden Christian cross around his neck.

As they passed, he lurched toward Caterina. Suddenly, his fist connected with her temple, and she staggered unprepared.

"Whores and traitors deserve this!" he spat, pulling a gleaming dagger from beneath his cloak.

Dominic, heart pounding, drew his own blade and slashed at the attacker's arm and side. The blade cut through cloth and skin, eliciting a howl of rage. The attacker lunged, and the two men tumbled to the dusty ground, rolling and cursing as blows were traded. Dominic's nose erupted in pain and blood flew.

The attacker gained the upper hand and rained punches on Dominic's head. Dominic dropped his dagger, dazed.

Caterina, trembling and on the verge of tears, cried out in shock.

Summoning strength, Dominic seized his fallen dagger. With desperate precision, he drove it into the man's side, then pulled it free and struck again—through neck and stomach. The attacker collapsed, lifeless.

Dominic grabbed Caterina's hand firmly. "Come," he whispered. "We run!"

They fled through darkened alleys, hearts pounding, until they reached the safety of their home.

Inside, Natan'el rushed to them, alarm etched on his face. Upon seeing Dominic's bloodied face and torn tunic, he demanded, "What happened?"

Dominic steadied himself and replied, "We were attacked in the street. From nowhere."

Caterina, voice still shaking, added, "He... he hit me, then tried to kill me."

Natan'el's eyes darkened. "This was vengeance. Perhaps from the Vatican. They know where you are, Caterina. Danger has found you at last."

Dominic exchanged a look with Natan'el. "If they know where she is, they know where I am. We both fled them together. I'm not safe either."

Silence settled heavily in the room. Then Natan'el spoke firmly. "From now on, for your safety, Caterina will wear a veil when you go outside."

Dominic nodded. "Yes. And I will be her shield. If they find her, they find me."

Caterina wiped her tears and managed a small nod. "Thank you."

Natan'el reached for the daggers. "We will train harder," he said quietly. "Your skill saved you tonight. But we must not be vulnerable again."

Dominic sheathed his blade and exhaled. The threat had come sharply into focus. The city's shadows were no longer distant, but personal.

They sat in the low lantern light, watchful, resolute—two souls entwined, bound by secret knowledge and the immediate taste of mortal peril.

And under the silent gaze of Jerusalem's ancient stones, their bond deepened, sharpened by fire and blood.

Uruk

The few weeks later, in the gray hush before dawn, Dominic and Caterina packed canvas cloth bags by the hearth. Natan'el stood over maps and ancient parchments, pointing out their route.

"We seek the earliest Gnostic scrolls," he said, voice low with reverence. "Texts predating even the church—perhaps forged in the shadow of Sumer. There are whispers they lie beneath the ruins of Uruk, the first city."

Natan'el looked Caterina in the eye. "Uruk lay far beyond the desert plains—part of ancient Sumer in what is Ottoman Mesopotamia, near the Euphrates. The distance from Jerusalem to Uruk spans roughly 500 miles as the crow flies. For a small caravan on horseback or camel, laden with goods and moving carefully, the journey would take roughly three to four weeks, factoring in terrain, rest, and stops.

They rented camels. And so at sunrise, three sturdy camels laden with provisions—dried meat, figs, dates, grains—stood outside. The caravan set out: Natan’el, Dominic, and Caterina, their hearts heavy with purpose.

The first day they crossed the Judean hills, trailing east through the Jordan Valley. Camels ambled over rocky plateaus; winds whispered in Arabic. That night they made camp near a small spring, drying meat and sharing ragged bread under a canopy of stars. Dominic smoked his pipe, a ribbon of smoke curling into the silence.

In following days they passed Bosra, the once proud Nabatean city, now quieter under Ottoman rule. Its stone ruins rose along ancient trade routes. At a small guesthouse, they spent a night, warmed by hospitality; Dominic caught fragments of Sufi poetry in the courtyard.

Further they traversed the arid expanse into Mesopotamia proper, traveling near the ruins of Palmyra, a once-thriving oasis city of great merchants and temples to Bel. Here, history clung to every sandstone pillar. At night, they camped among desert wind and the distant call of a jackal, eating dried fruit and talking of early Sumerian myths.

Starting to arrive they skirted the outskirts of Baghdad’s ruins—once the twin cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. The land grew flat and fertile, the Euphrates visible in long, shimmering curves.

In the evenings, they gathered around small fires, sharing morsels of salted meat and figs, Dominic’s pipe smoke drifting. The camaraderie deepened in the desert hush, their shared quest knitting them together.

As the Euphrates rolled beneath dawn’s first light, they edged closer to Uruk. Its ruins loomed ahead at last—a mound of brick, whispering of origins.

Dominic, gazing across the ancient city, murmured: “This place... the cradle of writing, of records. No wonder the scrolls may lie here.”

Caterina brushed fresh dust from her cloak. “We follow the oldest light.”

And Natan’el’s smile, grave yet hopeful: “Yes. We seek the spark that began all knowing.”

Their silhouettes outlined against the rising sun, they stepped into the ruins of Uruk, ready to unearth the earliest echoes of their faith.

The sun loomed golden and thick above the windswept plain, casting long shadows over the scattered ruins of Uruk. Brick upon broken brick, half-submerged in the sands of centuries, whispered the secrets of a thousand vanished lives. Dominic stood still, squinting into the sunlit dust. His fingers brushed a weather-worn stone marked by a half-erased inscription, his memory unfolding like a scroll.

"I remember reading of this place," he murmured, his voice soft, almost reverent. "In the depths of the Vatican libraries. Hidden in the sealed chambers. Few were allowed to touch those documents."

Caterina turned to him, her veil wrapped around her head to keep the wind from her hair. “What did they say? What do you remember?”

Dominic stepped forward, tracing the remnants of an old wall with his palm. “Uruk was raised by the hand of Enmerkar, son of the divine line of kings. Though the king-list notes a predecessor, it is Enmerkar whom the scribes credit with the building of the *House of Heaven*—for the goddess Inanna. The epic tells of it, how he constructed it in the Eanna District. This wasn’t just politics. It was theology.”

“Inanna,” Natan’el echoed, folding his arms. “The Sumerian Venus. Morning and evening star.”

Dominic nodded, eyes gleaming. “She was worshipped here in four aspects—the netherworld, the morning, the evening, and herself in full. The sanctuary of Inanna. The sanctuary of Inanna of the evening. The Temple of Heaven. The Temple of Heaven and Netherworld.”

He paused, gazing out toward a shattered rise of mudbrick columns and worn stone tablets. “We must begin our search in the Temple of Heaven,” he said. “The name alone speaks to us. It reflects the path of ascent, of light. A temple of sky, of spirit—closer to the Gnostic vision than any of the others.”

Natan’el stepped forward, peering across the landscape with a keen gaze. “Then we follow the trail of Venus—the morning star. The same light that lit the path of Sophia before her fall. Inanna may not be our goddess, but she bears the same mark.”

Caterina ran a hand across the edge of a sun-warmed stone, thoughtful. “They worshipped her as both descent and return... She’s the feminine mirror of the Logos.”

“And Venus has always been the symbol of the divine spark within,” Dominic added. “Even when they demonized her, buried her under false names.”

“Then let’s go,” Natan’el said, gesturing toward a rise of stone further east where half-topped pillars marked the edge of the Eanna District. “The Temple of Heaven awaits.”

As they walked, Dominic looked to the sky, where the sun burned low and warm behind scattered clouds. “Strange, isn’t it?” he said. “That here—where writing was born, where kings claimed heaven’s right—there may yet lie the first fragments of the Gnostic truth.”

Caterina smiled faintly. “Not strange. Fitting.”

Together, the three turned toward the ruins ahead. Each step carried them deeper into the oldest layers of human memory, chasing the fading footprints of a goddess once known by a thousand names—and the light that flickered behind them all.

The early morning sun climbed slowly as Dominic, Caterina, and Natan’el approached the sacred precinct of the Temple of Heaven. The ruins stood silent, their earthen forms mottled with time and dust.

Natan'el knelt by the wall and brushed debris aside. "Look," he motioned toward a small niche hidden in the broken stone. Within it lay several clay statuettes—Inanna carved in various poses—and scattered among them, gold coins and delicate silver jewelry. They gathered them together, placing each piece gently into their canvas bags.

Caterina whispered, "These artifacts... they're offerings, surely."

Dominic nodded. "We'll carry them back as tokens of the journey. But we do not forget our quest—those scrolls..."

They spent hours digging carefully. The earth shifted, and beneath the dust cracked wooden plates appeared—thin boards, now brittle, that once held objects sacred. Encouraged, they dug deeper.

At last, the earth yielded multiple clay tablets, engraved in strange scripts—unfamiliar signs that flew from wedge to line across the surface. Natan'el studied them in the torchlight.

"They are too worn to be parchment. We will not find scrolls here—only tablets," he said, reverent. They cleaned the tablets, revealing two larger ones marked with a familiar sunburst symbol—like their own cave's altar—and several smaller ones inscribed with early cuneiform or unknown dialects.



Dominic's heart quickened. "This may be what we sought," he breathed. "I cannot read the language—but perhaps Eustace or the Templars can translate. They know these ancient tongues."

Caterina smiled and nodded, reverent.

They paused to survey the ruins around them. Before them stood the foundations of what scholars called the Limestone Temple—possibly the first structure dedicated to Inanna. Though uncertain, its rectangular remains were aligned to the cardinal directions, with a central hall and two flanking rooms. Nearby lay the memorial building—a remembrance for the destroyed Stone-Cone Temple. It had once sustained a ritual fire and may have been adorned with murals.

They moved on to the cone-mosaic courtyard—where columns and walls had once glimmered, and where now a small aqueduct still wound through dry stone. It once irrigated a garden now vanished; in later eras, baths replaced the temple’s sacred spaces.

Standing amid the decay, they felt the weight of that magnificent culture—their presence a whisper against its grandeur.

With their findings safe and their hearts lifted, they loaded their bags and climbed back onto their camels. Each animal shifted beneath its burden. As they turned away from the ruins, the last rays of the sun lit the dust behind them in a golden haze.

Dominic exhaled, voice quiet: “We may have found the earliest echo of Light.”

Caterina touched his arm gently. “Light buried deep—but now uncovered.”

Natan’el nodded, eyes ahead. “Let it guide us back.”

And so they departed, casting long shadows over the sands, carrying stones and stories from the dawn of civilization into the uncertain twilight of their own journey.

They made camp under a sky thick with stars. The fire crackled; the wind softened around them. After their day’s toil, they gathered round the flames, unpacked their bags, and spread out the clay tablets. Dominic set the two tablets with the sun-symbol in the center, others around, and Natan’el examined them by torchlight.

Dominic traced one of the symbols again. “Look here — the sunburst motif appears on both tablets, though worn. These edges... they are deeper than the others.”

Caterina nodded, her face lit by fire. “They match the marking on the cave altar. It cannot be coincidence.”

Natan’el sighed, picking up a smaller tablet with strange lines. “They wrote many tongues here. Some cuneiform, some unknown. We may not translate them all. But the sun-sign is our thread.”

They ate salted meat and dried fruits, passing around thin slices of bread. Dominic smoked his pipe quietly, the bitter smoke curling in the cold night air.

After some silence, Dominic said, “Tell me, Natan’el — under Ottoman rule, what power do the rulers here really hold? We move in their world, but we are hidden. We need to know their reach.”

Natan'el poked the embers, then leaned forward. "Jerusalem in the 1650s is under Ottoman law. Since 1517 it has been part of the Ottoman Empire. Governed administratively via Damascus Eyalet. The Sultan in Istanbul is at the apex — he appoints the Wali, the local governor, who taxes, enforces law, maintains security."

Dominic listened, the firelight dancing on his face.

"The Wali's power is great, though always mixed with corruption. Much depends on how well he can keep the local notables satisfied, collect taxes, placate the Janissaries and soldiers. Ottoman soldiers and the Janissary corps guard the gates, patrol the streets — they take bribes, decide which pilgrims may pass, which goods are taxed or allowed."

Caterina frowned. "And the Qadis?"

"Islamic judges, yes," Natan'el continued. "Interpreters of Sharia. They settle disputes, deal with inheritance, marital law, criminal cases among Muslims. They rival each other, sometimes the Wali, in influence. And when wine, women, and heresy are involved — they stir trouble."

Dominic picked up one of the sun-tablets, hands trembling slightly. "So we walk between their laws and their shadows. Our order must avoid their notice."

Natan'el put a hand on Dominic's shoulder. "Exactly. We keep low. We be seen as harmless scholars or pilgrims. But know when to vanish. Know who watches."

Dominic rolled the tablet in his palms, feeling its weight. "If these tablets are translated, the light they bear could threaten many powers."

"And threaten we must," Natan'el said quietly. "Because truth buried under temples and walls does no one any good until it is taken into daylight."

They leaned back under the stars, silent except for the hiss of embers and the rustle of the night wind. The tablets lay between them — fragile, powerful — reminders that even in a land ruled by governors, judges, and soldiers, there is another law ... the law of light, older than all.

They sat round the dying embers of their campfire, the clay tablets piled beside Dominic. The night air was crisp, the stars sharp above them. Dominic exhaled pipe-smoke and turned to Natan'el.

Dominic: "Tell me more of the people back in Jerusalem—those of different faiths, those we pass in markets or in the alleys. I must know who watches, who supports, who can become friend or foe."

Natan'el tucked the tablets gently under a cloth and leaned forward, the firelight dancing in his eyes.

Natan'el: "Very well. Jerusalem is a tapestry of faiths and families, each thread strong and fragile. First, the Sunni scholars and imams. They are the predominant Muslim authority, custodians of the great sanctuaries—Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. They interpret law, lead prayer, preach from minbar. Their authority is grounded in Ottoman patronage, in the endowment waqf system, in scholarship in the madrasas."

Dominic nodded. "And the mystics? The fountains behind the curtain?"

Natan'el: "Yes. The Sufi brotherhoods. They have lodges in the city—dervish orders. They move in humility, in dhikr, in poetry. Sometimes at odds with more orthodox scholars. The ulama distrust them for their mystical exultations, for dancing, for seeing deeper visions beyond law. But among the common folk, they are venerated for healing, for peace, for hope."

Caterina, stirring the embers: "What about the power among Muslims locally—families, perhaps?"

Natan'el: "Wealthy clans—yes. Prominent families like the al-Husayn and the al-Khalidi families. These hold influence in city politics: in managing waqf lands, in negotiating with the Ottoman governor, in collecting taxes, in securing justice—or bending it. They are Muslim, but their loyalties lie both upwards to the Sultan and downward to neighbors, clients, servants. Their power is real but always balanced by janissaries, by Qadis, by law, by public opinion."

Dominic: "And the Jews? We passed the Jewish Quarter one morning. I saw Sephardic synagogues, heard spoken Ladino near the Wailing Wall."

Natan'el smiled, as though pleased with Dominic's sharp memory.

Natan'el: "Yes. The Jews in Jerusalem are of several kinds, each with their own standing and burdens. First, the Sephardic Jews, descendants of those expelled from Spain in 1492, spread through the Ottoman lands. Many came to Palestine, some to Jerusalem. They are often wealthier, more connected, scholars, traders. They often control communal leadership—synagogue funds, charity, study halls."

Caterina: "And the local Jews who were here before?"

Natan'el: "Those are the Mizrahi Jews, long-established Middle Eastern Jews. They speak Arabic, know the land, tied to crafts, trades, labor. Less wealthy on average than the Sephardic elites, less clout in the councils, but deeply rooted in daily life: artisans, scribes, servants, people of the neighborhoods."

Dominic: "Ashkenazi? Were there many of them in this time?"

Natan'el sighed. "Very few. The Ashkenazi Jews in the 1650s are a small diaspora, travelers, pilgrims, a handful of scholars. They face higher taxes, more prejudice. They are outsiders in many ways—language, custom, cost of living. Sometimes the community courts protect them; sometimes they are prey to overcharging and heavier levies."

Caterina: “Internal rivalries, I imagine?”

Natan’el: “Yes. The Sephardic elites often hold leadership: choosing the rabbi, managing the charity, setting communal taxes. That creates tension with poorer Jews, Mizrahi mostly, some Ashkenazi who feel their voices unheard. In some years, the Sephardic institutions send emissaries to Istanbul for funds. Sometimes donations from diaspora Sephardim bolster their position.”

Dominic leaned back, thinking. “So Jerusalem is many worlds in one: imams, Sufis, judges, clans; Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi Jews. Layer upon layer. And we, the Brotherhood, move in the shadows between these.”

Natan’el nodded. “Yes. For safety, for strategy. Knowing who holds power, who fears change, who loves knowledge—these are as important as knowing how to use a dagger.”

Caterina raised her cup of wine. “We are learning then, not only from tablets and caves, but from people.”

Dominic raised his too. “To wisdom, then—and to seeing clearly.”

They drank, flames flickering, tablets resting in cloth beside them, and the vastness of the night seemed alive with possibility and danger.

They had traveled for nearly two weeks, the weight of camels and tablets and desert beneath their feet, before the spires of Jerusalem rose again on the horizon. When they reached Natan’el’s house, they collapsed into rest. Days passed in recovery: sunbaked flesh soothed by cold water, hunger replaced by slow nourishing meals, silence shared in the twilight.

One dawn, Caterina wrapped a veil over her face—thin cloth that hid much, revealed little. Dominic did likewise under his hood. Together with Natan’el, they walked through the cool pre-morning streets, past shuttered shops, past olive trees dripping dew in courtyards, until they reached the Muslim Quarter. At a modest stone home, they knocked.

Eustace opened the door. His eyes flickered with warmth. “Brother, sister, welcome.” He motioned them in. Inside, the hearth was lit; spiced tea steaming in brass cups. A plate of oat cookies waited.

They settled around a low wooden table. Dominic reached into his cloth bag and drew out the clay tablets. One by one he laid them flat on the table between flickering candlelight.

“These are from Uruk,” he said, voice steady. “From the Temple of Heaven ruins. We believe they may be among the first Gnostic writings of our kind. The sun-symbol appears on two of them—marking, perhaps, lineage, or light. We dug many tablets, but these are the ones that match the relics of our cave.”

Eustace leaned forward, leaning on his cane. He examined the tablets: the sun-symbol, strange lines, etched signs unknown to his eyes. He traced a finger over one tablet.

“Indeed,” he said after a long pause, “there are marks here—glyphs I recognize, but many I cannot translate. I see the sunburst, the lines of radiance... but the script shifts—perhaps early Akkadian, mixed with dialects long lost.”

He sipped his tea, silent for several heartbeats, as if weighing something heavy. Then he looked up.

“I can trust you,” he said, “There is a Red Chapel, a refuge hidden beyond the desert dunes. Templar exiles are located there. Some still know aged scripts—those of them may help translate these tablets. Would you go with me?”

Dominic nodded. “We will.”

Caterina’s veil moved as she inhaled sharply, hope laced with fatigue. “Yes. To safeguard them.”

Eustace smiled, relief mingled with resolve. “Then prepare again. Camels. Provisions. I shall travel with you.”

They rented three camels as before, Eustace securing his own mount. At dawn, they set out across the dunes. The desert was silent and immense. That night they camped under a vault of stars, the only light their small fire, the only sound the hiss of wind and the distant cry of strange birds.

In the morning they arrived at a seemingly empty patch of desert—windswept dunes and broken stones. Eustace dismounted and brushed sand from the ground. With effort he uncovered a trapdoor—a wooden cover hidden beneath loose earth. Dusting off grains, he lifted it. Stairs descended beneath the sand.

They followed him underground. Stone corridors stretched narrow, then broader; chambers lined with armor racks, silent banners faded with time; walls decorated with the remnants of Templar heraldry. At last they came to a main room, heart of the refuge: a large wooden table. Two men sat there.

Eustace introduced them:

“This is Antonius of Malta, former Knight of Malta, wandering mercenary but of Templar blood. And Brother Matthieu de Blois, monk, also of Templar descent, keeper of maps and tunnels.”

Antonius nodded, quietly strong. Matthieu offered a gentle bow.

Dominic laid the tablets on the table before Antonius. Antonius picked up the first and investigated it for a while and said. “I know this language, I might be able to translate it”. An hour passed and Antonius read the text, tried to make sense of the translation, a scroll with ink and quill beside him, he wrote down the translation of the first tablet.

“In the dawn before form, light, unbidden, stirred.
Within each heart lies the spark, hidden under dust of flesh.
Gaze inward; in meditation the veil dissolves.
The inner realm awaits—no temple, no altar, but a silent flame.”

Then Antonius moved on to the next tablet and after a while scribed down the translation of it.

“Demons fashioned the world as mask and prison. Archons of dark desires bind the body.
They whisper fear into bones, doubt into soul.
But those who remember the Light shall shatter their chains.
Light will bleed through the cracks of night.”

Eustace’s eyes glowed. “These are among the most sacred relics of our fellowship. They must be safeguarded in the Red Chapel—hidden, protected.”

Natan’el placed a hand on Dominic’s shoulder. “Agreed. They belong not to one person, but to the Light.”

Caterina nodded. “We will protect them—even if it costs us everything.”

Brother Matthieu de Blois spoke in a low voice: “I have maps of tunnels beneath Jerusalem. If needed, we can move these tablets through hidden ways.”

Antonius added: “As long as none pursue—none discover our sanctuary. These relics are dangerous to those who would twist them.”

Dominic looked at each of them. “Then we will keep them here. Strengthen our ties. Prepare for the day when Light must rise.”

They sat together in that subterranean hall, brothers and sisters of a hidden path, the tablets between them glowing softly by torchlight. In that moment, their cause felt more than memory—it felt alive.

They gathered around the heavy wooden table in the dim chamber of the Red Chapel. Torchlight flickered against stone walls, illuminating the worn banners and ancient arms. Dominic, Natan’el, Caterina, Eustace, Antonius, and Matthieu de Blois sat close, leaning in. The relic-tablets lay between them, quiet witnesses.

Matthieu spoke first, his voice soft and certain. “I believe Jesus Christ was one of the great Enlightened Persons. Not unique only in His suffering, but in that He awakened fully. After enlightenment, one has access to vast knowledge—knowledge of Light, knowledge of the inner realm beyond the flesh. Jesus sought to teach these truths.”

Caterina nodded. “Yes. He taught parables. He spoke of seeds, of mustard seeds hidden in soil. Of light within men. Many heard, few understood.”

Antonius added, “And the Buddha, likewise. He sat under the Bodhi tree. He saw beyond illusion. He spoke of suffering, of release. He carried the spark of Light, though in different form, different language.”

Dominic leaned forward, eyes glowing. “There have been many. Some teach before crowds; others teach in silence. The spark is older than any creed. Jesus was one of many. Some call Him Son of God. But the truth is: the physical body is not the Son of Holy Consciousness. It is a creation of the Demiurge—part of the prison of forms.”

Eustace frowned, drumming his fingers on the table. “The Romans, the authorities—they knew. They knew Jesus spoke truths the Demiurge feared. They knew of Gnostics. So they conspired to ensure the Archons and false creators would triumph. They murdered Him, in that they tried to snuff out the light, to stop the awakening.”

Natan’el’s voice was quiet but fierce. “They cannot stop what is already awakened. Crucifixion is of flesh. The Cross is pain—but pain teaches. Jesus knew it was part of the path. He taught that the Light cannot be chained in death.”

Matthieu sat back, thoughtful. “But resurrection—the people celebrate that as victory over death. Yet some say that resurrection was itself a deed of the Archons—to draw people back into material suffering—making the myth, the belief in bodily resurrection, a chain.”

Dominic’s jaw tightened. “That many do not understand. They believe God raised Him bodily so they too may be saved physically. But perhaps the resurrection is symbolic, or else a tool by which the Archons trick believers into placing faith in form rather than in inner awakening.”

Eustace looked at Dominic, respect in his eyes. “So you believe in a second coming?”

Dominic hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. The second coming is not necessarily Christ walking again in flesh. It may be another enlightened being, another spark of Light rising in some hidden place. Some day, many will awaken. Some will teach, others will preserve, many will suffer—but the Light shines.”

Caterina’s voice was gentle: “The Light does not die. Even when crushed, even when buried, it waits in the soil, in stones, in the heart. It shines in the secret places.”

Antonius lifted his cup. “To the Light, then. And to all who carry it—past, present, and those yet unseen.”

Natan’el raised his own cup. “May the Light guide us. May it strengthen our fellowship. May truth outshine fear.”

They drank, silence settling among them like peace. The torches flickered; the relic-tablets gleamed softly in the candlelight. Around the table, in that hidden hall beneath sand and stone, they felt not just memory but destiny. The Light rose again, in their hands.

They were gathered in almost complete silence. Torchlight faintly flickered on the walls of the chamber, the relic-tablets between them, the air heavy with mystery. Dominic cleared his throat, hesitating, then spoke.

Dominic: “Brothers, may I ask... err...of the Ark of the Covenant. Is this real? Does it truly exist?”

Eustace looked up slowly, his face grave in the dim light. “Yes. It does. Here, in the Red Chapel, deeper underground than this hall, it is kept. But be warned, it radiates a force unknown. Approaching it is dangerous. It must be preserved but hidden.”

Natan’el shifted in his seat, concern in his eyes. “If it is real, then the enemies of truth will seek it. What history speaks of it?”

Eustace nodded, drawing in a breath.

“The Ark was fashioned in the time of Moses, by divine command. A chest made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, with poles for carrying. It held the Tablets of Law—those of the Ten Commandments. Some say also Aaron’s rod and a jar of manna. It was the mercy-seat between two cherubim. Between them God was said to speak. Its power was great. When carried in battle, the walls of Jericho fell. As Joshua 6:4-20 says: the priests carried trumpets before the Ark, marched around the city seven days, and on the seventh day, with a great shout—the walls collapsed.

Dominic swallowed. “So the Ark is not wholly good?”

Eustace’s voice grew quiet, heavy with knowledge. “Not simple. It may be a creation of the Archons—powerful, yes, but tied to fear, awe, obedience. It carries within it the words of decree—of law that binds. The same power that shattered Jericho may also destroy those unprepared. The fear, the holiness, the shadow. That is why it is kept hidden.”

Matthieu de Blois leaned forward, voice trembling slightly in the torchlight. “To look on the Ark unworthy is to court disaster. The Old Testament warns of priests struck down for touching it, of people of Beit Shemesh struck for curiosity. The law around it was exacting. It was never for common gaze.”

Caterina pressed her hand over her heart. “Then show us, brother Eustace. Let us see it—briefly—so we may know what we defend.”

Eustace rose, gathering his cloak. “It is not a marvel. It is a test. Come, my brothers.”

He led them through a narrow corridor, descending deeper underground. The air turned colder, moist. Stone walls, carved stairs, the echo of their footsteps sharpened.

At last, they came to a locked door. Eustace fit an iron key into its rusted lock; the hinges protested. The door swung open. Inside lay a chamber of cold stone. He motioned them within.

Natan'el helped them don iron breastplates for protection, as though entering a battlefield of souls.

At the far end of the chamber, under a cloth, stood a box on a stone pedestal. Eustace drew back the cover.

There, gleaming in the dim torchlight, was the golden Ark of the Covenant. Richly adorned, polished, yet ominous. The air around them seemed to shift.

Dominic felt a wave of nausea, as if the weight of something ancient pressed on his chest. The hairs on the back of his neck rose.

Eustace's voice was low, urgent. "Look not too long. It can kill the unprepared. Its presence is holiness and horror mingled. Let us leave before it consumes more than what eyes can bear."

The cloth snapped back over the Ark, hiding its gleam. The party backed away, hearts pounding.

Dominic thought. *"All the Light, all the danger. This is what we carry. Not just hope, but burden."*

They hurried back up the stone stairs, exiting the locked chamber. Once outside in relative space, Dominic gasped for breath.

Caterinas voice was trembling. "What... what was that?"

Eustace placed a hand on her shoulder. "The Ark's legacy is neither purely salvation nor purely destruction. It is a doorway. But one must walk through with eyes open, strength in spirit."

Dominic ran fingers over the relic-tablet in his bag. "We are in your debt for showing us this."

Natan'el nodded gravely. "Let none die for curiosity alone. But we will protect it—so that the Light may endure, even when engulfed by shadows."

They ascended from the depths, each transformed. Touched by something beyond belief, yet aware of its razor-edge power. The Ark returned to its hidden place, the chamber sealed. And the echo of its presence lingered in their bones.

They settled again in the long dim hall of the Red Chapel. The heavy oak doors closed behind them. Torches flickered, shadows danced against ancient stones. Eustace cleared his throat, and with reverence unspoken, he opened a leather-bound manuscript. The Gnostic texts were laid bare once more.

Eustace tipped the candle closer. He began softly, his voice echoing in the stillness:

“When the Saviour had risen, He appeared to the disciples, not in form of flesh alone, but as Light among Light. And Mary stood up in the midst, saying: Do not weep nor be troubled, for His grace will protect you all; praise His greatness, for He has prepared you to know the True Self.”

The words were from the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and Dominic heard them, tasted them like wine.

Eustace closed the manuscript softly, then opened another, dust catching in the flame:

“John, I have seen the mysteries of the heavens. You ask: who rules the world of forms? I tell you: the rulers are blind, bearing no sight; but those who know the Light will walk past them, for the world is but a veil over the higher realm.”

Matthieu de Blois nodded gently, understanding the weight of what was said.

After a silence, Dominic laid the tablets from Uruk on the table between them. The torchlight glinted off their sun-symbols.

Dominic said: “Brothers, how many Knights Templar remain in the world? Is our blood line extinct, or are there others still guarding secrets?”

Eustace’s face softened. “There are still a few. Here in the Holy Land we are few indeed—but we are. In Europe there exist small circles: in southern France, in parts of Italy, in Navarra. And beyond them—beyond the seas—there are those who went to the jungles of Latin America. They fled after the purges, carrying with them relics: the *Seal of Solomon Ring*, the *Blade of the Dawn*, ancient manuscripts in Palmyrene, and some vessels said to hold oil from Bethany.”

Caterina’s veil rustled. “Do you know their hideouts?”

Eustace nodded. “One group in the jungle of the Orinoco, among tribes who believe in forest spirits. A brother, named Miguel of León, keeps contact with the European circles. They send letters sealed, traveling through ports in Lisbon and Seville. But we have heard little in recent years; they must remain hidden.”

Dominic leaned forward. “So perhaps they have also some ancient tablets. They know languages older than Latin, older than Arabic—Palmyrene, perhaps even Sumerian dialects.”

Antonius of Malta smiled. “Yes. The brother Miguel has in his possession some cuneiform scholars of the indigenous tribes—ones taught by Jesuit missionaries, ironically—who now safeguard some of the Templar’s treasures, including books in lost script.”

Matthieu de Blois added: “And in Europe, in Toulouse and Limoges, there are brothers who study forgotten tongues—Phoenician, Akkadian, even Sumerian.”

Dominic felt hope stir. “Then we are not alone. Our task is to protect these relics and let their light spread.”

Caterina nodded. “And safeguard them from those who would use them for power, for fear.”

Eustace raised his brass cup of spiced tea. “To the preservation of Light, then. To the Templar blood still beating—and to every seeker who carries flame in darkness.”

They all touched their cups together, the sound small and resolute, and drank. The old hall seemed quieter after, as if listening. The relics, the tablets, the secret fellowship—all felt newer, more alive, in that moment.

They sat in silence a moment, the relic-tablets before them, the torches guttering as each reflected inward. Dominic broke the hush, voice soft and solemn.

“Brothers,” he said, “why does the Church call our Light Satan? They name purity as evil.”

Eustace’s eyes glowed in the low light. “This is the Church’s way to condemn what they do not understand. They name the Holy Light as evil to preserve their power. It is they who are servants of Satan and the Archons—those blind rulers of the material realm.”

Dominic’s voice sharpened. “Then this is a fight between Light and Darkness. Not mere words, but war—for souls, for truth.”

Eustace nodded, grave. “It is more: awakening people, so they may escape the claws of the material realm. The Light cannot be harmed. The Church might kill the body, chase us, torment us—but the Light is eternal, ever-existing, all-knowing Life itself.”

Caterina’s voice trembled yet was fierce. “The world is death. The body is a vessel of dust, of decay.”

Eustace leaned forward, voice dropping so only their circle could hear. “Adam and Eve died the day they ate from the Tree. And God took Adam and placed him in Paradise, of which he used to say, ‘Let it be Adam’s delight,’ but really in order to deceive him. For their food was bitter, and their beauty was depraved. Their delight is deception, and their tree is godlessness. Their fruit is an incurable poison, and their promise is death for him. As for their tree, which they planted (lying to Adam), it is the Tree of Life. I shall teach you about the mystery of their Life. It is their counterfeit spirit, from within them, in order to lead him astray, so that he might not know his perfection. That tree is of this sort—Its root is bitter, and its branches are shadows of death, and its leaves are hatred and deception and its perfume is an ointment of evil. And its fruit is the desire of death, and its seed drinks ever from darkness. Those who taste it—Hell is their dwelling place. And the darkness is their place of rest. But what THEY call, ‘The tree of knowledge of good and evil’, about whom they gave the commandment not to taste it.”

Dominic swallowed. “So when Adam and Eve ate, they stepped into this flesh, into this prison. The dead physical bodies were created, and Earth became Hell itself.”

Eustace’s face shadowed. “A fall from Light into form. Most of the world suffers, with only faint glimmers of good given to confuse the soul—so it hopes, so it lingers.”

Dominic's tone turned bitter. "The greatest trick the Devil ever played is convincing humankind this place is not Hell."

Caterina's veil rustled. "People are blinded by faith, by hope that things can change—that good will triumph in the world. But illness, earthquakes, famine and things of such nature—they will torment humankind until the end."

Eustace placed his hand over the relic-tablet. "The Devil is clever. He offers small kindness to make men wait—believe, work, suffer. But this is deception. There will be no turning of the heavens at their prayers unless they awaken in their hearts. Only then can one truly see."

Dominic's eyes glinted. "Then we must not hope for the world's deliverance—but for deliverance *from* the world."

Caterina nodded. "And walk the hidden path. Even if the body suffers, the Light within cannot be extinguished."

They sat after this, silent. The torches flickered, shadows deepened. The heavy weight of these truths settled among them. Yet something unspoken glowed in their hearts: they were not deceived, they were not alone, they were awake.

Eustace and the party sat together in the Red Chapel, drinking the last of the wine and sharing a final plate of salted meat. With the matter of the Ark weighing on their minds and silence hanging heavy, they rose from the table without further words. Outside, the desert wind was calm and the sun was beginning to dip beyond the horizon. They mounted their camels and began the slow journey back toward Jerusalem.

By nightfall, they made camp on a flat patch of sand, surrounded by rolling dunes. A small fire was kindled with care, its glow casting flickering shadows across their faces. The distant howl of a desert jackal or coyote echoed across the emptiness. Occasionally, a snake slithered past the edge of their camp, rustling faintly through the sand. The night was utterly dark above, stars cold and numberless. They huddled near the warmth of the fire, wrapped in cloaks, and slowly drifted to sleep under the canopy of stars.

The next day's journey was long and silent, each rider lost in their own thoughts. By sunset, Jerusalem's familiar skyline came into view—its domes and towers silhouetted against the orange sky. When they arrived home, they unpacked their gear with weary limbs and collapsed into their sleeping mats, too tired to speak. The days in the desert had taken their toll.

Catacombs

The morning after their return, the air in Jerusalem was cool and still. The party made their way through the narrow streets to Eustace's house, the dust of the past weeks still clinging to their clothes. Eustace greeted them at the door, already preparing for what lay ahead. He

stepped back inside, opened a carved wooden chest and took out his short sword. Then, without a word, he unhooked a set of chain mail from the wall and began strapping it over his tunic.

“We go into the catacombs today,” he said simply. “We’ve spoken of them before, beneath the oldest stones of the city. This entrance lies near the bend behind the ruined mikveh just east of the Church of Saint Anne. Few know of it, fewer dare descend.”

They gathered their torches, flint, and blades, and set out on foot. Jerusalem stirred slowly in the morning haze, the streets quiet, traders just beginning to sweep dust from their stalls. The old stone walls echoed the footfalls of the group as they turned into a forgotten alley between buildings weathered by centuries.

At the edge of a crumbling courtyard stood a rusted iron grate set low in the wall. Eustace knelt and pried it open with a grunt, revealing a narrow stairwell descending into earth. They lit their torches, and one by one began their descent into the damp, close air of the catacombs.

The tunnels stretched out before them like veins beneath the skin of the city. The walls were old, cut from bedrock, worn smooth by time and footsteps. Eustace led them steadily forward, his steps sure in the familiar sections. The air grew heavier as they passed chambers carved by long-dead hands. Flickers of torchlight caught old etchings in the stone—symbols of forgotten gods, half-erased curses, the remnants of rituals.

Soon they reached a part of the tunnel that narrowed, sloping slightly downward. Eustace slowed. “This part I do not know,” he said. “We’ll go carefully.”

After some minutes of winding turns and the scent of old dampness, they entered a room whose air was colder than the rest. The moment their torches illuminated the interior, they stopped.

In the center stood an altar of blackened stone. Around it, five burnt-down candles formed a pentagram, wax melted onto the floor. The altar itself was stained dark with dried blood, and in the corner of the room, a severed goat’s head lay with eyes long emptied. The stench was sharp and animal.

A small back chamber beckoned. They stepped in and found a chest. Inside were robes of black linen, each marked with a crimson flame insignia.

Natanel narrowed his eyes. “The Black Flame,” he whispered. “Their nest is deeper than we thought.”

After some time, heavy footsteps echoed behind them. Five men appeared in the doorway—two cloaked in black with flames on their sleeves, three dressed in tattered clerical robes. One of them shouted, his voice ragged with rage.

“Thieves! Heretics! Kill them!”

The room exploded into violence.

Eustace unsheathed his sword in a single motion and met the first attacker with a feral yell. Steel rang against steel as the monk's blade met his. Eustace twisted and slammed his sword through the man's ribs, then spun and severed his head with a clean sweep. Blood sprayed across the wall in an arc, catching the light of the torch as the head rolled to the floor.

Dominic ducked a wild swing and lunged forward, driving his dagger toward a cultist's thigh. The man struck him hard with a boot to the gut—Dominic flew backward, slammed into the wall, and crumpled to the ground, breath gone.

Caterina screamed as one of the monks rushed her, knocking her from her feet. Her head hit the stone floor with a crack, blood blooming beneath her hair. She crawled away, dazed, gasping.

Natanel met the third monk with fury, parrying a dagger with his own and delivering a blow to the man's throat. As the monk stumbled, choking, Natanel sank the blade into his side and pulled upward until the flesh split.

Dominic, eyes dazed and blood trailing from his nose, forced himself up. One of the robed cultists approached, dagger raised, but Dominic caught him off guard, grabbed a stone from the floor and smashed it into the man's jaw. The cultist staggered—Dominic seized his own dagger and drove it into the man's eye, twisting until it pierced the skull. The body collapsed in a pool of blood.

Only one remained, a cultist with a broken nose and wild eyes. He turned to flee, but Eustace caught him and drove his sword down through his back with a grunt. The man crumpled without a sound.

The room was still again.

Bodies lay crumpled, limbs twisted in unnatural ways, the floor slick with blood. The altar was now surrounded by the dead.

Eustace stood over them, his face soaked in blood, dripping from his brow and beard. He exhaled heavily, sword still in hand, breath ragged from the fight.

"We're not alone down here," he said, voice flat and dark. "This was no accident. They guard something. Or someone."

Dominic limped over to Caterina and helped her to her feet. She was pale, blood on her temple, but alive.

Natanel pulled a blood-soaked robe off one of the cultists and examined the flame symbol.

"They've been nesting here a long time," he said. "We need to know what lies deeper."

They all looked toward the black tunnel ahead—no words needed. The catacombs had more to reveal.

They pressed forward into the tunnels, deeper than before. The stones closed in, water dripping, heated air turning stale. Torchlight flickered on walls flecked with cobwebs. Each step echoing, every breath tight with expectation.

Suddenly, the passage opened into a massive underground temple. Statues of Baphomet loomed carved against stone walls; a great central altar stood piled high with offerings, wax dripping, candles burning dim. The temple architecture felt ancient—foundations that might date back to Canaanite Baal worship, reused now, corrupted, serving a darker purpose. Dominic’s heart clenched: this is a temple of the Cult of the Black Flame.

Atop the altar rested a golden chalice, a heap of silver coins, and a golden amulet. Dominic crept forward, reached out, slipped them into his dirty cloth bag. His fingers trembled. Eustace stepped forward, shoving at a large statue of Baphomet. It toppled, smashing against the cold stone floor, the sound thunderous in the chamber. Statues cracked, shards flying.

They saw on the walls carvings that pre-dated even the first temple period: geometric friezes, horned bulls, ritual scenes in faded relief. Nearby mosaics—Roman in style—depicted bulls being sacrificed, scenes of horns and altar smoke. Over these, newer distortions: figures of flame and darkness, inscriptions of invocation to shadow gods.

Eustace spat at the broken statue’s face. “May its power die with the ruin.”

Caterina gasped, “Light must purge this, or the darkness spreads.”

They worked fast. Smashing statues, overturning altars, ripping down banners. Fires flickered as they set cloth ablaze, wooden chairs, small icons. Ash drifted in torchlight, the scent thick.

Dominic’s voice cracked, “Take what we can—these relics must be ours.”

Natan’el smashed a carved panel, sending splinters across the floor. Flames licked at stone. They ransacked the offerings: coins, amulets, chalices. Glittering metal resting in Dominic’s bag.

Once destruction was finished, they slipped away from the altar room, disappearing into shadowy corridors. Water rose at their ankles in some tunnels. In corners, voices—not quite voices—whispers that faded whenever they listened. Caterina shivered, clutching her arm. Moss and cobweb brushed their shoulders. The air was thick with dust, age, and something older—fear.

As hours passed, they threaded passages, turning left, then right, avoiding known traps, following Eustace who carried a sword, torch held high. Their weapons ready.

Finally, as the first light of dawn crept faintly, they saw a stair and climbed, emerging from the catacombs into Jerusalem’s early morning air. Sun struck their faces; they gasped fresh air. Silence around them felt sacred.

Dominic sagged, gingerly clutching his side. Caterina leaned on his shoulder, wiping blood from her brow. Eustace stood watching the sky, sweat and ash and blood matted in his hair.

They walked home, wordless, every footstep heavy but hearts blazing. The work was done. The temple was desecrated. The relics stolen. And the Light had been borne out of darkness.

Ottomans revenge

The dust had not yet settled in the underground sanctuary when priestess Layla bint Harith entered. The steps of her sandals echoed through the desecrated chamber, each one heavier than the last. She paused at the threshold, eyes wide and unblinking, her breath catching as the scent of burnt offerings and ash filled her lungs. But the altar of Baphometh was no longer whole. The braziers lay overturned, the great statue split at its torso, its horned head shattered upon the ground. Blood, once offered in rites beneath stars and silence, now crusted the stone like forgotten ink.

She dropped to her knees.

Her fingers, pale and shaking, brushed against the broken face of the idol. The hollow sockets stared back at her, blind and eternal. Her voice was low and sharp, trembling with fury.

“Desecration... sacrilege...”

She stood with sudden force, her black robes whipping behind her like smoke. The twin serpents woven into her sleeves curled as if alive. She threw back her hood and turned toward the mouth of the cave.

“Hassan!” she screamed into the dark.

Moments later, he came, breathless from climbing the pass. Hassan al-Badawi—scarred, lean, his eyes wild from too many nights beneath foreign stars. His curved dagger gleamed at his belt, and a crimson sash was tied loosely at his waist.

He saw the ruin and faltered. “By the Black Flame... what is this?”

“The work of cowards,” Layla hissed, voice raw. “The Ottomans. Who else dares touch what lies beneath? Who else but fools wrapped in green and gold dares call our fire a blasphemy?”

She paced before him, her fury uncoiled and lashing.

“They shattered the Eye. They stole the Codex of the Bound Flame. And look—look at the Circle of Thorns!” She gestured to the far wall, where a mural had been scraped clean, only ghost-like outlines remaining beneath torch-smoke.

Hassan’s knuckles whitened. “I swear by the dust of Uruk, they will pay.”

“Not just pay,” she said, eyes narrowing. “They will beg for silence. Go to Yusuf ibn Tariq. He listens where others do not. He sells whispers like water. Find out which Ottoman pig sent the order. And then we burn his bloodline from the record.”

Hassan bowed with his hand on his chest and left the ruins behind.

The Dragoman Yusuf ibn Tariq lived in a sun-split chamber above a spice merchant's shop near the Damascus Gate. The smell of cardamom and betrayal lingered in his rooms. He greeted Hassan with a smile as serpentine as the tattoos hidden beneath his sleeves.

"Ah, my desert friend," Yusuf said, pouring sweet wine into two copper cups. "You return smelling of sand and fury. How can I help?"

Hassan refused the cup, his eyes burning. "Someone desecrated the temple of my people. Statues crushed. Relics stolen. The work of soldiers. Ottoman."

Yusuf raised his brows, sipping from his own cup. "Tragedy. But so common these days. Sacred things rarely survive the march of empire."

"Who gave the order?" Hassan demanded.

Yusuf set the cup down with a delicate clink and leaned forward, his voice lowering. "You did not hear this from me. But word has passed through court and corridor... Wali Mehmet Pasha al-Rumi himself considered your temple a threat. An abomination. He gave the order. Said it was a den of apostasy, worse than the Crusaders' catacombs."

Hassan's face twisted. "Then his death will be holy."

Yusuf said nothing, only smiled thinly as Hassan stormed out. He turned back to his ledgers and whispered, "Poor fool. Let fire dance where it will."

That same night, under the cloak of moonlight, Hassan crept through the alleys near Jaffa Gate. The walls breathed with shadow, and the nightwatchmen paced with slow, rhythmic steps. Hassan moved like a wraith, slipping between archways until he reached the barracks.

Murad Çelebi, captain of the Janissaries, sat near the main post, polishing his saber and laughing with two younger guards. His voice was gravel and smoke.

Hassan waited. Then struck.

A flash of silver. A single cry. The Janissary captain fell with his throat opened clean, blood spilling across the stone like a red river. The other guards leapt to their feet too late—Hassan was gone, vanished into the maze of Jerusalem.

The next morning, the city awoke to chaos.

The gates were shut by order of the Wali. Ottoman banners flew higher than usual, and a public decree rang out in every quarter.

"In the name of the Sultan and the Empire, the killer of Captain Murad Çelebi shall be found and executed. All who harbor fugitives will be treated as traitors. Jerusalem will know discipline."

Soldiers poured into the streets. Swords at their sides, they searched homes without warning. Inns were torn apart, prayer halls questioned, courtyards stripped of privacy.

In the Jewish Quarter, rabbis shouted protests from rooftops, only to be dragged away by soldiers.

In the Christian Quarter, Franciscan priests barred the doors to the Church of the Flagellation, only to have them broken open by Ottoman boots.

In the Muslim souks, whispers rose like steam—Jews did it. No, it was the Latins. It was the Armenians. It was the Greeks.

Tensions boiled. Fights broke out between pilgrims. Market stalls were overturned. A Greek Orthodox scribe was stabbed in the alley behind the Holy Sepulchre. A Sephardic merchant's house was burned. Three Coptic monks were arrested without charge.

Natan'el, watching from a rooftop near the spice market, whispered, "And so it begins."

Caterina looked out over the smoke curling above the rooftops. "Then Jerusalem burns not from fire—but from within."

Natan'el turned to her, his voice grave.

"And the Black Flame," he said, "with it"

Beneath the city, Layla lit three candles before the shattered altar and whispered, "Let the world burn. Our god walks in shadow."

And above, the streets choked on rage.

The midday heat pressed against the domes and narrow alleys of Jerusalem like a heavy, invisible hand. But within the arched stone chambers of the Saraya—the Ottoman governor's residence—the air was cool, still, and tense. Wali Mehmet Pasha al-Rumi stood beneath a broad window framed with blue Iznik tiles, his gaze fixed not on the beauty of the courtyard below, but on the soldier kneeling before him.

The Janissary captain had brought news.

"Speak again," Mehmet Pasha ordered, fingers clasped behind his back.

The captain bowed lower. "Yes, Excellency. We followed the way into catacombs beneath Jerusalem, as you ordered. Beyond the fourth bend, we found it."

"It?"

"The temple, Excellency. Carved into the stone. An altar desecrated. Idols shattered. Symbols unlike any I've seen. Burnt offerings, traces of blood... and bones."

The governor turned slowly, his expression cold and unreadable. "The Cult is real, then."

“Yes, Excellency. We found sigils painted in human ash. And there is no doubt—they venerated something horned. Something called Baphometh.”

Mehmet Pasha exhaled sharply, muttering in Turkish under his breath. “Black Flame...”

He turned to his scribe. “Issue a silent command. I want every known whisper, every rumor, every cursed scroll about this Cult. Bring the imams. And the astrologers too. I want names, symbols, hierarchy—everything.”

That evening, the streets swelled with patrols. Ottoman guards marched in clusters, weapons gleaming, sabers at their hips. Questions spread like fever: Who were the Black Flame? Where did they hide? Who could be trusted?

Dominic stood in the shadowed arch of the Armenian Quarter, watching the soldiers pass. The moment had arrived. It was time to move.

He made his way through twisting alleys to Eustace’s house. There, beneath a hanging oil lamp, Brother Eustace of Gascony bent over a book, muttering to himself in Latin.

Dominic stepped in. “Brother Eustace. I need a name. You’ve studied the underground orders. You know the Black Flame well. You said once you saw its priestess in Alexandria.”

Eustace smiled and closed the book. “Layla bint Harith. Daughter of Harith the Silent. She leads the Jerusalem cell. Priestess. Trained in the deeper rites.”

Dominic bowed his head. “That’s all I needed.”

He turned and left without another word.

The guard at the Lion Gate looked up as Dominic approached, sweat streaking down his brow. “What?”

“I have a name,” Dominic said quietly. “The one behind the desecrated temple. The one you hunt.”

The guard squinted. “What name?”

“Layla bint Harith.”

The name struck like flint against dry wood. The guard straightened, his face changing. He called for another. Within minutes, runners were dispatched. The Black Flame now had a face.

The next day, the Wali was preparing to receive the Mufti when the doors of the Saraya burst open. Father Lorenzo da Perugia entered in full Franciscan habit, his eyes sharp with fury.

“Excellency,” Lorenzo said, voice clipped. “You hunt shadows.”

Wali Mehmet Pasha raised a brow. “I hunt devils in human skin.”

“The Cult you speak of has been exaggerated. Misunderstood. There is no proof of their danger.”

“You defend them?” the Wali asked, stepping down from the dais. “You, priest of Rome? You come here to speak for heretics who whisper in catacombs, who sacrifice to horned idols?”

Lorenzo’s jaw tightened. “I speak for balance. For order. For those who have kept secrets the empire does not understand. You see horns in every shadow, and now soldiers bleed in the streets because of your obsession.”

The Wali’s face darkened. “My captain was murdered in cold blood. My men are ambushed nightly. Your Black Flame slithers through this city like a sickness—and now you come to ask me to spare them?”

“They are not your enemies!” Lorenzo snapped. “You wage war against allies in secret, Excellency. You will regret this.”

“I do not fear threats wrapped in cassocks,” Mehmet Pasha growled. “The blood of Janissaries stains my streets. For every drop spilled, I will take a river from those who serve this... Shaitan cult.”

“Careful, Turk,” Lorenzo whispered. “You war not only with shadows now, but with Rome itself.”

The two men stared at each other, flames flickering in their eyes.

Then Lorenzo turned on his heel and left, his robe billowing like a storm.

The air over Jerusalem thickened with tension, a city held in quiet siege. At night, silence became dangerous. It crept along rooftops and slithered through stone alleys, whispering with the scent of old blood and burning oil. The footsoldiers of the Cult of the Black Flame had begun to move.

They came with the darkness—robed in ash-colored cloth, marked subtly at the throat with a blackened flame. Some bore curved knives; others used garrotes, or slender poisoned needles hidden in their sleeves. They struck not in fury but in ritual. Their killings were not vengeance—they were offerings.

One Janissary patrol vanished without trace near the market of Khan al-Zeit. The next morning, their bodies were found hanging by the ankles beneath the arch of the Cotton Merchants' Gate, throats cut and tongues nailed to the wood, a sign daubed in blood: "The false flame devours the blind."

Two more soldiers were murdered outside the Hammam al-Ayn, throats slit in perfect silence while bathers inside heard nothing. One was still clutching his sword, eyes wide open.

In the Jewish Quarter, an Ottoman informant was found with his face submerged in a basin of ink—drowned, suffocated by words.

The city whispered.

Each night the killings grew bolder. A captain in the Wali's household was gutted near the Armenian hospice. A Sufi cleric sympathetic to the Empire was found dead with black wax poured into his ears.

By dawn, the cycle reversed.

Ottoman soldiers, furious and shamed, stormed the quarters. Street after street turned to turmoil. Doors were smashed open without warning. Names shouted. Old men dragged from cellars. Sons beaten before fathers. Scrolls seized. Women spat on the boots of soldiers and were struck down with the backs of swords.

At the Gate of the Chain, a boy of fifteen was seized. His dagger bore the symbol of the Flame. He spat blood into the face of the officer who questioned him. The officer ordered him hanged on the spot.

That afternoon, five more were rounded up near the Via Dolorosa—two tailors, a baker's apprentice, a mute scribe, and a woman who read fortunes in the shade of a broken fountain. They were accused, dragged into the street, lined against the wall. The crowd watched, frozen, as swords were flashing.

"On whose word?" someone asked. "Where is the evidence?"

The officer raised a hand. "The evidence bleeds. This is the price of treason."

By evening, a silence fell over the quarter. Not peace—only fear.

But the Cult did not retreat.

A detachment of ten soldiers was ambushed near the cisterns beneath the Church of St. John. All ten were found flayed at the shoulders, wrists bound behind their backs with linen soaked in wine. A single candle was left burning beside each corpse, and carved into their chests: "The body burns. The soul returns."

Each death was a rite. Each retaliation, a warning.

Wali Mehmet Pasha stood over the latest body, face unreadable.

"They are not men," he muttered. "They are a sickness."

His aide bowed beside him. "What are your orders, Excellency?"

The Wali's voice turned to ice.

"No trial. No prison. Any bearing the mark is to be executed. Their ashes scattered. Their names removed from the record."

And so the cycle spiraled.

Day and night lost meaning. Blood soaked the cobbled lanes. Ash collected in doorways. The ancient city groaned under its own weight.

And somewhere in the shadows, Layla bint Harith watched.

She whispered to her disciples, her eyes gleaming beneath her hood:

“Let them search. Let them burn. The shadow has always lived beneath the stone.”

And the stone, for now, bled.

The sky over Jerusalem had gone starless, a dense black pressing down upon the city like a velvet shroud. Somewhere beyond the minarets and sleeping rooftops, an owl called once—and fell silent.

In the upper quarters of the Saraya, Wali Mehmet Pasha al-Rumi reclined in quiet contemplation, the candlelight flickering across a manuscript spread open on a marble desk. He had not slept; his mind was heavy with the weight of conspiracies and blood. The scent of rosewater mingled with the distant smoke of burned offerings still clinging to the city’s breath.

But the silence was broken.

A shadow moved through the narrow window—silent, swift, clad in a cloak dark as soot. The figure dropped into the Wali’s chambers with feline grace, a curved dagger already drawn.

Mehmet Pasha turned just in time to block the blade with the leg of the stool he had kicked into the assassin’s path. The blade glanced off the wood with a crack, and the assassin lunged again.

They struggled fiercely—one old and battle-hardened, the other quick and precise. The Wali drew his own dagger, an Ottoman blade of Damascus steel. They circled. Then a misstep—Mehmet Pasha stumbled, and the assassin moved in for the final thrust.

A scream rang out from the corridor. Steel sang. The guards had heard the noise.

Within seconds, three Janissaries flooded the room. The assassin spun, slashed one guard across the chest, but another drove a spear into his side. The figure fell with a choking hiss, dagger still clutched in a bloody hand.

Wali Mehmet Pasha looked down at the corpse, then at the ring still on the man’s finger—a gold signet, carved with the seal of the Latin Custody.

He turned to the captain. “Send ten men. At dawn, Father Lorenzo dies.”

The sun had barely crested the hills when steel-clad soldiers stormed the Franciscan residence near the Holy Sepulchre. Doors were kicked open. Robes torn. Scrolls thrown into the street. The priests cried out in Latin and Italian—but the soldiers pushed forward.

They found Father Lorenzo da Perugia in the rear chamber, already dressing, as if expecting them.

He stood tall. “This is a holy house. I demand audience with the Wali. I will answer to no one else.”

“You will answer,” the Janissary captain growled, “to the sword.”

And there, in the courtyard where the morning light first touched the stones, the guards forced Lorenzo to his knees.

“No words?” the captain asked.

Lorenzo lifted his chin. “This city will regret your arrogance.”

Then the blade came down.

His head fell to the dust.

That same hour, just outside the Damascus Gate, Ottoman guards halted a lone man traveling on foot. He was dark-haired, well-dressed, and clutching a sealed letter under his robes.

“Name,” barked one of the soldiers.

“Pedro Alvarez de Córdoba,” the man answered, Spanish accent clipped. “Jesuit. I serve the Holy See.”

One of the guards yanked the letter from his grasp. It bore the black seal of the Vatican.

The captain broke it open, read a few lines, then looked up with narrowed eyes.

“To Rome?” he muttered. “Reporting the death of Lorenzo?”

Pedro did not respond.

The captain tossed the letter into the dirt, unsheathed his sword, and drove it through the Jesuit’s stomach. Pedro collapsed without a cry.

The guard tore the letter to pieces and threw them into the wind.

“No more whispers to the Pope,” he said.

That night, as the city’s air thickened with tension, Layla bint Harith crept through the alleys near the Armenian Quarter. She moved with the silence of a cat, hood drawn, eyes alert. But the face of a single guard, watching from a rooftop, caught the shadow of her movement.

“You there—stop!”

She ran.

But more guards poured from the alleys like hounds. She was cornered near the garden of the old bathhouse, her blade drawn, her eyes blazing with fire.

She fought.

She wounded two.

But they broke her legs and dragged her bleeding through the streets to the Saraya.

Inside, the torches burned low and the chains hung cold. Layla was lashed to a pillar, bruised, naked, bloody, and defiant.

Wali Mehmet Pasha stood before her. "You are the priestess. Say it."

She spat blood. "The darkness is eternal."

He stepped closer. "Give me the name. The leader. Or you will die screaming."

She laughed, a sound more animal than woman. "You think the Emir fears fire? He is fire."

Mehmet Pasha nodded to the torturer.

Screams filled the chamber.

By dawn, she broke.

"Ibn Israaq Ahmed," she whispered. "He is the one you seek. He is the Black Emir."

The Wali did not hesitate.

"Execute her."

And so she was dragged into the courtyard and beheaded before a silent crowd. Her head was displayed on the wall of the Saraya, her name struck from the tongues of her followers.

The wrath of the Ottomans knew no pause.

By the end of that week, forty footsoldiers of the Black Flame were hunted, cornered, and slain in the streets. Some were cut down in the souks. Others stabbed in their own homes. A few tried to flee, but none escaped. Bodies were hung at city gates. Blood flowed like water through the alleys. The city reeked of fear and iron.

On the sixth day, the guards found two more:

Father Girolamo Conti, the Italian friar, unmasked as a traitor hiding behind his Franciscan robe, a secret bearer of the Flame. He had been preaching peace by day, and lighting the fires by night.

And Hassan al-Badawi, desert-born assassin, scout, and killer.

Both were captured in a cistern beneath the Monastery of St. Anne, preparing an escape route.

They were marched through the city at noon, stripped of robes and titles.

As the bells of the Latin quarter rang out, the executioner swung the rope.

Their feet kicked once. Then stilled.

In the chambers of the Wali, a map was laid across the table. A red circle was drawn around the name: Ibn Israq Ahmed.

Wali Mehmet Pasha pressed his hand to the parchment.

“Now,” he said, “we hunt the Emir.”

And across the cracked city of Jerusalem, silence fell—but not peace.

The walls of Natan’el’s home flickered with the amber light of lanterns, casting long shadows across the thick rugs and worn stone. The air was thick with the scent of wine, roasted chickpeas, and cumin. Outside, the streets of Jerusalem held their breath, choked by the tension of locked gates and the aftermath of bloodshed. Inside, there was a rare moment of calm.

Brother Eustace of Gascony leaned back against a cushion, his chainmail partially unbuckled. He laughed—a low, rough sound earned from years of desert raids and shadowy campaigns.

Dominic raised his cup, swirling the dark red wine. “It’s done. The Cult of the Black Flame is broken. Their priestess confessed, the Emir’s name echoes through the city. Their footsoldiers lie in the dust. One of our oldest enemies—burned by their own fire.”

Caterina, seated near the hearth, gave a thin smile. “You stirred every sect in this city against them.”

Eustace grinned, lifting his cup in return. “Divide and conquer, my favorite prayer.”

They drank, the clay mugs clinking gently.

“The Emir,” Eustace added, wiping his mouth with the back of his glove. “I know him. I know Ibn Israq Ahmed.”

Dominic turned his head sharply. “You’ve seen him?”

“Years ago. Damascus. He was preaching in whispers even then—talking of the false light, of the burning God beneath creation. I remember his voice. Soft like silk, but soaked in venom. If he is still in this city, he will not escape again.”

Dominic stood, placing his mug aside. “The gates are closed. If he tries to leave, it will be now. Dressed in lies.”

Eustace rose as well, pulling his short sword from beneath his cloak. The blade shimmered with oil, its hilt etched with the fading sun of the old Templar sigil. “Then let’s ride. One last shadow to banish.”

Dominic strapped his dagger, the curved edge still bloodstained from earlier nights. “No hesitation this time.”

They pulled their hoods up, faces swallowed in shadow, and slipped into the alleys.

At that same hour, across the Armenian Quarter, a lone figure stood before a small stable. He tightened the last strap of his uniform—an Ottoman officer’s garb, clean and authoritative, bearing forged insignia on the shoulder. His face was half-covered by a linen scarf, eyes dark, unreadable.

Ibn Israaq Ahmed.

He swung into the saddle, hands steady, the black mare beneath him restless with nerves. A forged scroll of orders was tucked beneath his belt.

He whispered to the guard at the Lion Gate, “I ride to scout the outer flanks. Rumors of escaped heretics.”

The guard gave a quick salute, barely glancing at the paper. “May Allah keep you, bey.”

The Emir spurred his horse forward. The gate creaked open.

At that very moment, Eustace and Dominic were walking past the gate, eyes scanning faces. Eustace stopped cold, staring at the mounted man’s profile.

“Dominic,” he said low, “That’s him.”

“The Emir?” Dominic whispered.

“I swear it.”

But the Emir was already galloping through the open gate.

“Mount!” Eustace shouted, pointing to two tethered horses nearby. The owners yelled in protest, but the knight paid no heed. They leapt into the saddles and kicked into pursuit.

The chase tore across the sand-blasted hills east of Jerusalem, where the desert opened like a wound. The sun had begun its climb, turning the sky into a sheet of gold and rust. The Emir rode hard, his mare flying across dry riverbeds and narrow cliffs.

Eustace and Dominic followed at full speed, hooves hammering rock, dust spiraling behind them in plumes.

“He rides like a man with the Devil at his heels!” Eustace shouted, holding tight to the reins.

“No!” Dominic called back, eyes narrowing. “He rides like he is the Devil!”

The Emir veered down a ravine, the sides narrowing. Dominic urged his mount closer, gripping the hilt of his dagger. He reached forward—

And leapt.

He tackled the Emir from his horse. Both men slammed into the sand and rolled, limbs entangled, weapons clattering. The horses scattered.

The Emir rose first, a curved scimitar already drawn. He slashed—Dominic ducked, barely missing the arc of steel.

Eustace arrived with a cry, slamming into the Emir with his shoulder. The two of them pressed him between them. Steel clanged. Sand sprayed.

The Emir struck wildly. Eustace caught a blade into his stomach and gasped, blood already seeping between his fingers.

Dominic lunged, his dagger grazing the Emir's arm—but received a slash across the face for his effort, the blade opening a crimson smile from cheek to temple.

Gasping, Dominic dropped to one knee.

The Emir raised his scimitar to finish him—but Eustace, wounded, roared and drove his short sword into the Emir's side. The blade sank deep.

Dominic leapt up, grabbing the Emir from behind, wrapping his arm around his throat.

“Your flame dies with you!” he growled.

With a final twist, he pulled the Emir to the ground. The two of them fell upon him. Together, they tore the blade free and drove it again, again, until the Emir's blood soaked the sand.

Eustace collapsed beside the corpse, face pale.

Dominic, blood streaming from his cheek, pulled him up. “Stay with me.”

“I see stars...” Eustace murmured.

“No stars,” Dominic said, lifting him onto the back of his horse. “Not yet.”

Hours later, under the fading sun, Dominic galloped back into the gates of Jerusalem, clutching Eustace's bloodied form. The guards opened the way.

He rode straight to the Jewish Quarter, to the home of **Esther bat Shlomo**—midwife, healer, and whispered to be something older still.

She met him at the door, shawl over her hair, eyes sharp as blades.

“He's dying,” Dominic said.

Esther did not blink. “Bring him inside.”

She laid Eustace down, opened her bundles of herbs and salves. She murmured prayers in a Hebrew older than memory, burned a pinch of salt and myrrh, and began to sew the wound.

Dominic knelt beside the table, face cut, eyes rimmed red.

Esther looked up once. “He may live. But only if Fate chooses so.”

And in the low light of the healer’s room, as smoke curled toward the ceiling and blood darkened the linens, the final breath of the Black Flame’s fury passed from the city.

But the scars it left would not heal quickly.

Not in the flesh. Not in the soul.

Weeks passed. The blood faded from the streets, and the city of Jerusalem, scarred but breathing, resumed its ancient rhythm. Traders once more called from the market stalls, incense rose from chapel and mosque alike, and beneath the quiet surface of daily life, something older stirred—not of violence, but of truth.

Eustace healed slowly. The wound to his stomach had come close to taking him, but Esther bat Shlomo’s hands, guided by knowledge whispered across generations, had brought him back from the edge. His movements remained cautious, his steps slower than before, but the light in his eyes had returned.

Dominic, Caterina, and Natan’el often walked together through the narrow paths out of the city, past the olive groves, to the hidden cave, their Gnostic temple. It was there, in silence and shadow, that they spoke the words of the old Gnosis. They lit the torches, sang in tongues long vanished from the lips of priests, and read aloud from the secret texts.

In those hours beneath the earth, the world above ceased to matter. No soldiers. No papal decree. Only the Light, and the way it danced between them.

At other times, with Eustace again on his feet, they ventured together to the Red Chapel—a hidden chamber buried beneath the desert sand. It was there that the last remnants of the Knights Templar, faded but unbroken, held vigil. Maps were studied, names recorded, sacred symbols carved into the stone once more. The union between the Gnostic Brotherhood and the old Templar lines was no longer a secret pact—it was now a living bond.

Dominic often sat alone in the small, forgotten library near the Church of St. James, where a trusted friend among the Orthodox monks had given him quiet access. He read tirelessly, his fingers black with ink, his lips murmuring ancient Greek, Syriac, Coptic. Scrolls copied in dim light were then passed to Caterina, who hid them inside jars. Natan’el buried others beneath the sands outside the city, near abandoned wells and shepherds’ tombs. Some were hidden in the caves west of the Cedron Valley—scrolls wrapped in linen, sealed with wax, marked with the Sign of the Flame turned inward, a symbol of awakening, not destruction.

New disciples found their way to them. A friar from Marseille, pale and trembling, arrived by way of a grain caravan. A former Melkite monk from Aleppo came under cover of

pilgrimage. Two brothers from Florence, said to have escaped an Inquisition dungeon, were led blindfolded to the Red Chapel and wept when they saw the old Templar cross carved into the wall.

Together, they copied. They buried. They learned.

The Cult of the Black Flame was gone, consumed by its own fury.

But the Brotherhood of the Light had survived—quiet, watchful, rooted deep in the city's forgotten places.

By day, Dominic walked among pilgrims like any other monk. By night, he prayed beneath stars, speaking the names of the aeons. Caterina taught hymns none had sung in centuries. Eustace trained the younger ones in sword and discipline. Natan'el traced constellations on the stone with chalk and whispered their meanings in Armenian.

And so the Light endured.

Not as fire.

But as a lamp carried in hidden hands, far from the towers of power.

And in Jerusalem, beneath stones walked by prophets and kings, the Gnostic flame lived on.